



Tucker Free Library & White Birch Active Living

THE PAGE-TURNERS HOLIDAY

Read your specially curated holiday story, poem, or excerpt to capture the magic of the season. Please consider the following questions that we will discuss at our gathering.

- 1) Did you feel the magic of the story, poem, excerpt?
- 2) What was your favorite part of the story, poem, excerpt?
(Highlight and prepare to read aloud)
- 3) What feelings did your selection conjure up?
- 4) As you were reading, did it trigger any memories?
- 5) How did the characters evolve in your story, poem, excerpt? Did your opinion or memories change?
- 6) What was your reaction to the piece you read? Do you remember reading it before?
- 7) Will you share it with anyone else?
- 8) Free associate, wax nostalgic, reminisce!



TITLE

Is There A Santa Claus?
True Meaning of Christmas
How the Grinch Stole Christmas
Winter-Time
A Visit From St. Nicholas
Little Tree
A Christmas Circular Letter
Christmas Bells
In Memoriam (Ring out, Wild Bells)
House of Christmas
Music on Christmas Morning
Christmas Party at The South Danbury Church
Christmas Tree
Christmas Day in the Morning
Fir-Tree
Little Match Girl
Kidnapped Santa Claus
Christmas at Orchard House
Christmas at Dingley Dell
Homecoming: A Novel About Spencer's Mountain
Gift of the Magi
Burglar's Christmas

The Gift
Dulce Domum
Deck the Halls
A Child's Christmas in Wales
A Hospital Christmas Eve
Discovery of Christmas
Home for Christmas
Selfish Giant
A Christmas Memory (1956)
One Christmas (1982) For Gloria Dunphy
The Christmas Miracle of Jonathan Toomey

SOURCE

Newseum.org
internet
internet
Poets.org
Poetry Foundation
Family Christmas - Selected by Caroline Kennedy
Family Christmas - Selected by Caroline Kennedy
Christmas Bells by Jennifer Chiaverini
Poets.org
gkc.org
digital.library.upenn.edu
Family Christmas - Selected by Caroline Kennedy
Family Christmas - Selected by Caroline Kennedy
Family Christmas - Selected by Caroline Kennedy
Family Book of Christmas Songs & Stories
Family Book of Christmas Songs & Stories
Family Book of Christmas Songs & Stories
Family Book of Christmas Songs & Stories
Family Book of Christmas Songs & Stories

Cather.unl.edu
Twice Twenty-two: Golden Apples of the Sun a
Medicine for Melancholy
The Wind in The Willows
Just an Ordinary Day

Carson McCullers: Stories, Plays & Other Writing
Carson McCullers: Stories, Plays & Other Writing
Carson McCullers: Stories, Plays & Other Writing
Complete Works of Oscar Wilde
Truman Capote: The Complete Stories
Truman Capote: The Complete Stories

AUTHOR

Virginia O'Hanlon
Linus
Seuss
Robert Louis Stevenson
Clement Clark Moore
E.E. Cummings
Robert Frost
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow
Alford Lord Tennyson
G.K. Chesterton
Anne Bronte
Donald Hall
Emma Lazarus
Pearl Buck
Hans Christian Andersen
Hans Christian Andersen
L. Frank Baum
Louisa May Alcott
Charles Dickens
Earl Hamner, Jr.
O. Henry
Elizabeth L. Seymour

Ray Bradbury
Kenneth Grahame
Shirley Jackson
Dylan Thomas
Carson McCullers
Carson McCullers
Carson McCullers
Oscar Wilde
Truman Capote
Truman Capote
Susan Wojciechowski

ADDITIONAL INFO

Francis Pharellus Church
Luke, Chapter 2 v. 8-14

from Delineator, Vo LXIV

Chapters 3, 7, 9
Illustrated P.J. Lynch
aka Willa Cather

Chapter 5

Illustrated by Trina Schart Hyman

Illustrated by P.J. Lynch



DEAR EDITOR: I am 8 years old.
Some of my little friends say there is no Santa Claus.
Papa says, 'If you see it in THE SUN it's so.'
Please tell me the truth; is there a Santa Claus?

VIRGINIA O'HANLON,
115 WEST NINETY-FIFTH STREET.



"Yes, Virginia, There is a Santa Claus"

Eight-year-old Virginia O'Hanlon wrote a letter to the editor of New York's *Sun*, and the quick response was printed as an unsigned editorial Sept. 21, 1897. The work of veteran newsman Francis Pharcellus Church has since become history's most reprinted newspaper editorial, appearing in part or whole in dozens of languages in books, movies, and other editorials, and on posters and stamps

Is There a Santa Claus?

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

"DEAR EDITOR: I am 8 years old.

"Some of my little friends say there is no Santa Claus.

"Papa says 'If you see it in THE SUN it's so.'

"Please tell me the truth; is there a Santa Claus?"

"VIRGINIA O'HANLON.

"115 WEST NINETY-FIFTH STREET."

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

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

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

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

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

The True Meaning of Christmas (recited by Linus)

by [Anonymous](#)

Linus' speech about the true meaning of Christmas is the highlight of [A Charlie Brown Christmas](#). Retrieved from [The Bible, King James Version](#), Book 42 Luke, Chapter 2, verses 8 to 14. [Image of Charlie Brown and Linus is a screenshot retrieved from Wikipedia under fair use.]



Retrieved from *A Charlie Brown Christmas*:

"I guess you were right, Linus. I shouldn't have picked this little tree," said Charlie Brown. "Everything I do turns into a disaster. I guess I don't really know what Christmas is all about. Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?"

"Sure, Charlie Brown, I can tell you what Christmas is all about," said Linus. [*Linus walks to center stage.*]

"Lights, please."

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

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

*And the angel said unto 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 Saviour,
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 the
heavenly host praising God, and saying,*

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

--Book 42, Luke (002:08-14)

The Bible, King James Version

[Linus picks up his blanket and shuffles off-stage.]

How The Grinch Stole Christmas Poem

Every Who Down in Whoville Liked Christmas a lot...
But the Grinch, Who lived just north of Whoville, Did NOT!
The Grinch hated Christmas! The whole Christmas season!
Now, please don't ask why. No one quite knows the reason.
It could be his head wasn't screwed on just right.
It could be, perhaps, that his shoes were too tight.
But I think that the most likely reason of all,
May have been that his heart was two sizes too small.
Whatever the reason, His heart or his shoes,
He stood there on Christmas Eve, hating the Whos,
Staring down from his cave with a sour, Grinchy frown,
At the warm lighted windows below in their town.
For he knew every Who down in Whoville beneath,
Was busy now, hanging a mistletoe wreath.
"And they're hanging their stockings!" he snarled with a sneer,
"Tomorrow is Christmas! It's practically here!"
Then he growled, with his Grinch fingers nervously drumming,
"I MUST find some way to stop Christmas from coming!"
For Tomorrow, he knew, all the Who girls and boys,
Would wake bright and early. They'd rush for their toys!
And then! Oh, the noise! Oh, the Noise!
Noise! Noise! Noise!
That's one thing he hated! The NOISE!
NOISE! NOISE! NOISE!
Then the Whos, young and old, would sit down to a feast.
And they'd feast! And they'd feast! And they'd FEAST!
FEAST! FEAST! FEAST!
They would feast on Who-pudding, and rare Who-roast beast.
Which was something the Grinch couldn't stand in the least!
And THEN They'd do something He liked least of all!
Every Who down in Whoville, the tall and the small,
Would stand close together, with Christmas bells ringing.
They'd stand hand-in-hand. And the Whos would start singing!
They'd sing! And they'd sing! And they'd SING!
SING! SING! SING!
And the more the Grinch thought of this Who Christmas Sing,
The more the Grinch thought, "I must stop this whole thing!"
"Why, for fifty-three years I've put up with it now!"
"I MUST stop this Christmas from coming! But HOW?"
Then he got an idea! An awful idea!
THE GRINCH GOT A WONDERFUL, AWFUL IDEA!
"I know just what to do!" The Grinch laughed in his throat.
And he made a quick Santy Claus hat and a coat.
And he chuckled, and clucked, "What a great Grinchy trick!"
"With this coat and this hat, I look just like Saint Nick!"
"All I need is a reindeer..." The Grinch looked around.

But, since reindeer are scarce, there was none to be found.

Did that stop the old Grinch? No! The Grinch simply said,
"If I can't find a reindeer, I'll make one instead!"
So he called his dog, Max. Then he took some red thread,
And he tied a big horn on the top of his head.
THEN He loaded some bags And some old empty sacks,
On a ramshackle sleigh And he hitched up old Max.
Then the Grinch said, "Giddap!" And the sleigh started down,
Toward the homes where the Whos Lay asnooze in their town.
All their windows were dark. Quiet snow filled the air.
All the Whos were all dreaming sweet dreams without care.
When he came to the first little house on the square.
"This is stop number one," the old Grinchy Claus hissed,
And he climbed to the roof, empty bags in his fist.
Then he slid down the chimney. A rather tight pinch.
But, if Santa could do it, then so could the Grinch.
He got stuck only once, for a moment or two.
Then he stuck his head out of the fireplace flue.
Where the little Who stockings all hung in a row.
"These stockings," he grinned, "are the first things to go!"
Then he slithered and slunk, with a smile most unpleasant,
Around the whole room, and he took every present!
Pop guns! And bicycles! Roller skates! Drums!
Checkerboards! Tricycles! Popcorn! And plums!
And he stuffed them in bags. Then the Grinch, very nimbly,
Stuffed all the bags, one by one, up the chimney!
Then he slunk to the icebox. He took the Whos' feast!
He took the Who-pudding! He took the roast beast!
He cleaned out that icebox as quick as a flash.
Why, that Grinch even took their last can of Who-hash!
Then he stuffed all the food up the chimney with glee.
"And NOW!" grinned the Grinch, "I will stuff up the tree!"
And the Grinch grabbed the tree, and he started to shove,
When he heard a small sound like the coo of a dove.
He turned around fast, and he saw a small Who!
Little Cindy-Lou Who, who was not more than two.
The Grinch had been caught by this tiny Who daughter,
Who'd got out of bed for a cup of cold water.
She stared at the Grinch and said, "Santy Claus, why,"
"Why are you taking our Christmas tree? WHY?"
But, you know, that old Grinch was so smart and so slick,
He thought up a lie, and he thought it up quick!
"Why, my sweet little tot," the fake Santy Claus lied,
"There's a light on this tree that won't light on one side."
"So I'm taking it home to my workshop, my dear."
"I'll fix it up there. Then I'll bring it back here."
And his fib fooled the child. Then he patted her head,

And he got her a drink and he sent her to bed.
And when Cindy-Lou Who went to bed with her cup,
HE went to the chimney and stuffed the tree up!
Then the last thing he took Was the log for their fire!
Then he went up the chimney, himself, the old liar.
On their walls he left nothing but hooks and some wire.
And the one speck of food That he left in the house,
Was a crumb that was even too small for a mouse.
Then He did the same thing To the other Whos' houses
Leaving crumbs Much too small For the other Whos' mouses!
It was quarter past dawn... All the Whos, still a-bed,
All the Whos, still asnooze When he packed up his sled,
Packed it up with their presents! The ribbons! The wrappings!
The tags! And the tinsel! The trimmings! The trappings!
Three thousand feet up! Up the side of Mt. Crumpit,
He rode with his load to the tiptop to dump it!
"PoohPooh to the Whos!" he was grinchishly humming.
"They're finding out now that no Christmas is coming!"
"They're just waking up! I know just what they'll do!"
"Their mouths will hang open a minute or two,
Then the Whos down in Whoville will all cry BooHoo!"
"That's a noise," grinned the Grinch, "That I simply MUST hear!"
So he paused. And the Grinch put his hand to his ear.
And he did hear a sound rising over the snow.
It started in low. Then it started to grow.
But the sound wasn't sad! Why, this sound sounded merry!
It couldn't be so! But it WAS merry! VERY!
He stared down at Whoville! The Grinch popped his eyes!
Then he shook! What he saw was a shocking surprise!
Every Who down in Whoville, the tall and the small,
Was singing! Without any presents at all!
He HADN'T stopped Christmas from coming! IT CAME!
Somehow or other, it came just the same!
And the Grinch, with his grinch-feet ice-cold in the snow,
Stood puzzling and puzzling: "How could it be so?"
"It came with out ribbons! It came without tags!"
"It came without packages, boxes or bags!"
And he puzzled three hours, till his puzzler was sore.
Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before!
"Maybe Christmas," he thought, "doesn't come from a store."
"Maybe Christmas...perhaps...means a little bit more!"
And what happened then? Well...in Whoville they say,
That the Grinch's small heart Grew three sizes that day!
And the minute his heart didn't feel quite so tight,
He whizzed with his load through the bright morning light,
And he brought back the toys! And the food for the feast!
And he, HE HIMSELF! The Grinch carved the roast beast!

The end of How the Grinch Stole Christmas

poets.org

Published on Academy of American Poets (<https://poets.org>)

Winter-Time

Late lies the wintry sun a-bed,
A frosty, fiery sleepy-head;
Blinks but an hour or two; and then,
A blood-red orange, sets again.

Before the stars have left the skies,
At morning in the dark I rise;
And shivering in my nakedness,
By the cold candle, bathe and dress.

Close by the jolly fire I sit
To warm my frozen bones a bit;
Or with a reindeer-sled, explore
The colder countries round the door.

When to go out, my nurse doth wrap
Me in my comforter and cap;
The cold wind burns my face, and blows
Its frosty pepper up my nose.

Black are my steps on silver sod;
Thick blows my frosty breath abroad;
And tree and house, and hill and lake,
Are frosted like a wedding-cake.

Credit

This poem is in the public domain.

Author

Robert Louis Stevenson



Born on November 13, 1850, in Edinburgh, Scotland, Robert Louis Balfour Stevenson

Date Published: 1885-01-01

Source URL: <https://poets.org/poem/winter-time>



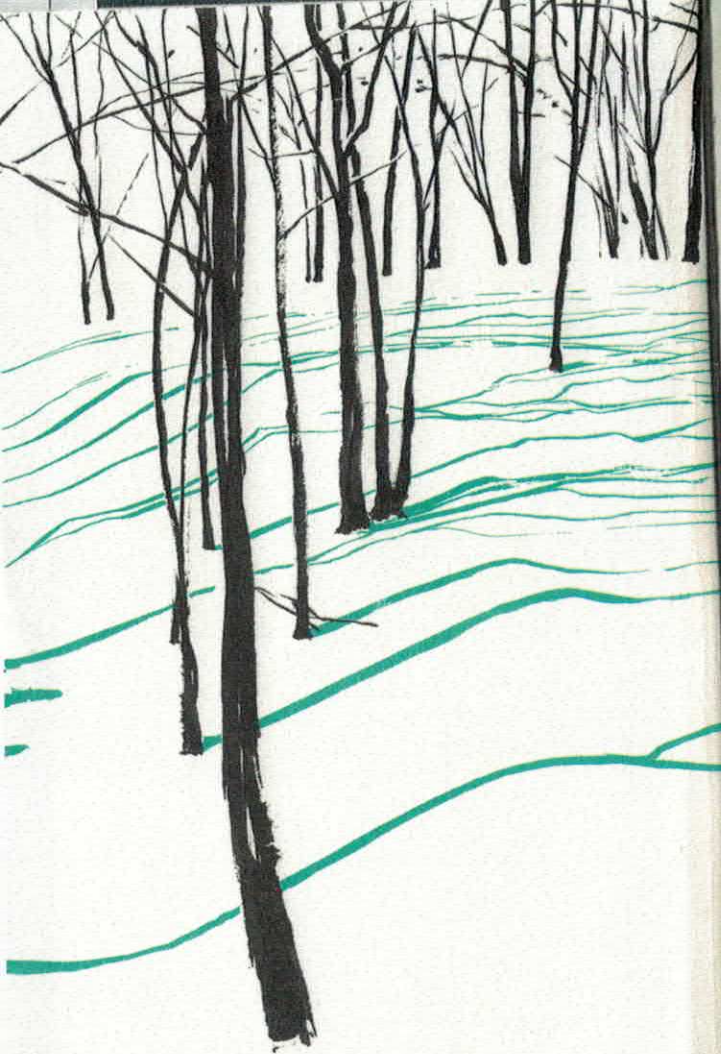
A Visit from St. Nicholas

BY CLEMENT CLARKE 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 our brains for a long winter's nap,
When out on the lawn there arose such a clatter,
I sprang from my 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 a lustre of midday to objects below,
When what to my wondering eyes did appear,
But a miniature sleigh and eight tiny rein-deer,
With a little old driver so lively and quick,
I knew in a moment he 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 leaves that before the wild hurricane fly,
When they meet with an obstacle, mount to the sky;
So up to the housetop 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 pedler 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 on 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 bowl full 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!”

Source: *The Random House Book of Poetry for Children* (Random House Inc., 1983)



A FAMILY CHRISTMAS

SELECTED AND INTRODUCED BY

Caroline Kennedy

Illustrated by Jon J Muth
and Laura Hartman Maestro

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*Kennedy Onassis
in Action*

A FAMILY CHRISTMAS

SELECTED AND INTRODUCED BY

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 HYPERION
NEW YORK

LITTLE TREE

E. E. CUMMINGS

*little tree
little silent Christmas tree
you are so little
you are more like a flower*

*who found you in the green forest
and were you very sorry to come away?
see i will comfort you
because you smell so sweetly*

*i will kiss your cool bark
and hug you safe and tight
just as your mother would,
only don't be afraid*

*look the spangles
that sleep all the year in a dark box
dreaming of being taken out and allowed to shine,
the balls the chains red and gold the fluffy threads,*

*put up your little arms
and i'll give them all to you to hold
every finger shall have its ring
and there won't be a single place dark or unhappy*

*then when you're quite dressed
you'll stand in the window for everyone to see
and how they'll stare!
oh but you'll be very proud*

*and my little sister and i will take hands
and looking up at our beautiful tree
we'll dance and sing
"Noel Noel"*



CHRISTMAS TREES

A Christmas Circular Letter

ROBERT FROST

*The city had withdrawn into itself
And left at last the country to the country;
And when between whirls of snow not come to lie
And whirls of foliage not yet laid, there drove
A stranger to our yard, who looked the city,
Yet did in country fashion in that there
He sat and waited till he drew us out
A-buttoning coats to ask him who he was,
He proved to be the city come again
To look for something it had left behind
And could not do without and keep its Christmas.
He asked if I would sell my Christmas trees,
My woods—the young fir balsams like a place
Where houses are all churches and have spires.
I hadn't thought of them as Christmas trees.
I doubt if I was tempted for a moment
To sell them off their feet to go in cars
And leave the slope behind the house all bare,
Where the sun shines now no warmer than the moon
I'd hate to have them know it if I was.
Yet more I'd hate to hold my trees except
As others hold theirs or effuse for them,
Beyond the time of profitable growth,
The trial by market everything must come to
I dallied so much with the thought of selling*

*Then whether from mistaken courtesy
And fear of seeming short of speech, or whether
From hope of hearing good of what was mine,
I said, "There aren't enough to be worth while."
"I could soon tell how many they would cut,
You let me look them over."*

*"You could look
But don't expect I'm going to let you have them."
Pasture they spring in, some in clumps too close
That lop each other of boughs, but not a few
Quite solitary and having equal boughs
All round and round. The latter he nodded "Yes" to,
Or paused to say beneath some lovelier one,
With a buyer's moderation, "That would do."
I thought so too, but wasn't there to say so.
We climbed the pasture on the south, crossed over,
And came down on the north.*

He said, "A thousand."

"A thousand Christmas trees!—at what apiece?"

*He felt some need of softening that to me:
"A thousand trees would come to thirty dollars."*

*Then I was certain I had never meant
To let him have them. Never show surprise!
But thirty dollars seemed so small beside
The extent of pasture I should strip, three cents
(For that was all they figured out apiece),
Three cents so small beside the dollar friends
I should be writing to within the hour
Would pay in cities for good trees like those,*

Regular vestry-trees whose Sunday Schools
Could hang enough on to pick off enough.
A thousand Christmas trees I didn't know I had!
Worth three cents more to give away than sell,
As may be shown by a simple calculation.
Too bad I couldn't lay one in a letter.
I can't help wishing I could send you one,
In wishing you berewith a Merry Christmas.



A FAMILY CHRISTMAS

SELECTED AND INTRODUCED BY
Caroline Kennedy

Illustrated by Jon J Muth
and Laura Hartman Maestro

JAFFREY PUBLIC LIBRARY

 HYPERION
NEW YORK

Christmas Bells

by

HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW



I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old, familiar carols play,
 And wild and sweet
 The words repeat
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
 Had rolled along
 The unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Till ringing, singing on its way,
The world revolved from night to day,
 A voice, a chime,
 A chant sublime
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,
 And with the sound
 The carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearth-stones of a continent,
 And made forlorn
 The households born
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And in despair I bowed my head;
"There is no peace on earth," I said;
 "For hate is strong,
 And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
 The Wrong shall fail,
 The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men."

In Memoriam, [Ring out, wild bells]

Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,
The flying cloud, the frosty light:
The year is dying in the night;
Ring out, wild bells, and let him die.

Ring out the old, ring in the new,
Ring, happy bells, across the snow:
The year is going, let him go;
Ring out the false, ring in the true.

Ring out the grief that saps the mind
For those that here we see no more;
Ring out the feud of rich and poor,
Ring in redress to all mankind.

Ring out a slowly dying cause,
And ancient forms of party strife;
Ring in the nobler modes of life,
With sweeter manners, purer laws.

Ring out the want, the care, the sin,
The faithless coldness of the times;
Ring out, ring out my mournful rhymes
But ring the fuller minstrel in.

Ring out false pride in place and blood,
The civic slander and the spite;
Ring in the love of truth and right,
Ring in the common love of good.

Ring out old shapes of foul disease;
Ring out the narrowing lust of gold;
Ring out the thousand wars of old,
Ring in the thousand years of peace.

Ring in the valiant man and free,
The larger heart, the kindlier hand;
Ring out the darkness of the land,
Ring in the Christ that is to be.

Credit

This poem is in the public domain.

Author

Alfred Lord Tennyson



Born in 1809, Alfred Lord Tennyson is one of the most well-loved Victorian poets.

Date Published: 1850-01-01

Source URL: <https://poets.org/poem/memorial-ring-out-wild-bells>

The House of Christmas

G.K. Chesterton

By: G. K. Chesterton

There fared a mother driven forth
Out of an inn to roam;
In the place where she was homeless
All men are at home.
The crazy stable close at hand,
With shaking timber and shifting sand,
Grew a stronger thing to abide and stand
Than the square stones of Rome.

For men are homesick in their homes,
And strangers under the sun,
And they lay on their heads in a foreign land
Whenever the day is done.
Here we have battle and blazing eyes,
And chance and honour and high surprise,
But our homes are under miraculous skies
Where the yule tale was begun.

A Child in a foul stable,
Where the beasts feed and foam;
Only where He was homeless
Are you and I at home;
We have hands that fashion and heads that know,
But our hearts we lost - how long ago!
In a place no chart nor ship can show
Under the sky's dome.

This world is wild as an old wives' tale,
And strange the plain things are,
The earth is enough and the air is enough
For our wonder and our war;
But our rest is as far as the fire-drake swings
And our peace is put in impossible things
Where clashed and thundered unthinkable wings
Round an incredible star.

To an open house in the evening
Home shall men come,
To an older place than Eden
And a taller town than Rome.

To the end of the way of the wandering star,
To the things that cannot be and that are,
To the place where God was homeless
And all men are at home.



[Up to G.K.Chesterton's Works on the Web.](#)

Last modified: 18th December, 1999

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A Celebration of Women Writers

"Music on Christmas Morning." by [Anne Brontë](#) (1820-1849)

First Publication: *Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell* London: Aylott and Jones, 8, Paternoster Row, 1846. pp. 45-46.

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MUSIC ON CHRISTMAS MORNING.

MUSIC I love—but never strain
 Could kindle raptures so divine,
 So grief assuage, so conquer pain,
 And rouse this pensive heart of mine—
 As that we hear on Christmas morn,
 Upon the wintry breezes borne.

Though Darkness still her empire keep,
 And hours must pass, ere morning break;
 From troubled dreams, or slumbers deep,
 That music *kindly* bids us wake:
 It calls us, with an angel's voice,
 To wake, and worship, and rejoice;

To greet with joy the glorious morn,
 Which angels welcomed long ago,
 When our redeeming Lord was born,
 To bring the light of Heaven below;
 The Powers of Darkness to dispel,
 And rescue Earth from Death and Hell.

While listening to that sacred strain,
 My raptured spirit soars on high;
 I seem to hear those songs again
 Resounding through the open sky,
 That kindled such divine delight,
 In those who watched their flocks by night.

[Page 46]

With them, I celebrate His birth—
 Glory to God, in highest Heaven,
 Good-will to men, and peace on Earth,
 To us a Saviour-king is given;

Our God is come to claim His own,
And Satan's power is overthrown!

A sinless God, for sinful men,
Descends to suffer and to bleed;
Hell *must* renounce its empire then;
The price is paid, the world is freed,
And Satan's self must now confess,
That Christ has earned a *Right* to bless:

Now holy Peace may smile from heaven,
And heavenly Truth from earth shall spring:
The captive's galling bonds are riven,
For our Redeemer is our king;
And He that gave his blood for men
Will lead us home to God again.

ACTON.

[Next]



Notes:

No manuscript for this poem is known to exist. It is therefore difficult to date.

A Celebration of Women Writers: Mary Mark Ockerbloom, Editor.

A FAMILY CHRISTMAS

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Caroline Kennedy

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CHRISTMAS PARTY AT THE SOUTH DANBURY CHURCH

DONALD HALL

*December twenty-first
we gather at the white Church festooned
red and green, the tree flashing
green-red lights beside the altar.
After the children of Sunday School
recite Scripture, sing songs,
and scrape out solos,
they retire to dress for the finale,
to perform the pageant
again: Mary and Joseph kneeling
cradleside, Three Kings,
shepherds and shepherdesses. Their garments
are bathrobes with mothholes,
cut down from the Church's ancestors.
Standing short and long,
they stare in all directions for mothers,
sisters and brothers,
giggling and waving in recognition,
and at the South Danbury
Church, a moment before Santa
arrives with her ho-hos
and bags of popcorn, in the half-dark
of whole silence, God
enters the world as a newborn again.*



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THE CHRISTMAS TREE

EMMA LAZARUS

*Crusted with silver, gemmed with stars of light,
Topaz and ruby, emerald, sapphire, pearl,
The enchanted tree within a world of white
Uplifts her myriad crystal branches bright
Against the pale blue skies. The keen winds whirl
Her globed jewels on the sheeted snow,
That hard and pure as marble lies below.*

*Yet even as the radiant fruitage falls,
Touching the solid earth, it melts to air.
Gold-glimmering rings and clear, flame-hearted balls,—
These be the magic keys to elfin balls.*

*The outstretched hands of greed are void and bare,
But elfin hands may clasp, elf eyes may see,
The mystic glories of the wondrous tree.*

*Lo, as beneath the silver boughs I stood,
And watched the gleaming jewel in their heart,
Blue as a star, the subtle charm held good:
I touched and clasped a dropping diamond dart,
And, rapt from all the snowy world apart,
Alone within the moist, green woods of May,
I wandered ere the middle hour of day.*

And over me the magic tree outspread

Her rustling branches like a silken tent;
An azure light the balmy heavens shed;
Rose-white with odorous bloom above my head,

Scarce 'neath their burden soft the wreathed sprays bent.
Through them went singing birds, and once on high
Surely a blindfold, winged boy-god flew by.

In the cool shade two happy mortals stood

And laughed, because the spring was in their veins,
Coursing like heavenly fire along their blood,
To see the sunbeams pierce the emerald wood,

To hear each other's voice, to catch the strains
Of sweet bird-carols in the tree-tops high;
And laughed like gods, who are not born to die.

A spirit murmured in mine ear unseen,

"Rub well the dart thou holdest." I obeyed,
And all the tree was swathed in living green,
Veiled with hot, hazy sunshine, and between

The ripe, dark leaves plump cherries white and red,
Swaying on slender stalks with every breeze,
Glowed like the gold fruits of Hesperides.

Once more I rubbed the talisman. There came

Once more a change: the rusty leaves outshone
With tints of bronze against a sky of flame,
Weird with strange light, the same yet not the same.

But brief the glory, setting with the sun:
A fog-white wraith uprose to haunt the tree,
And shrill winds whistled through it drearily.

From out my hand the mystic arrow fell:

Like dew it vanished, and I was aware
Of winter-tide and death. Ah, was it well,
Ye mocking elves, to weave this subtle spell,

And break it thus, dissolving into air
The fairy fabric of my dream, and show
Life a brief vision melting with the snow?



CHRISTMAS DAY IN THE MORNING

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! That was fifty years ago, and his father had been dead for thirty, yet he waked at four o'clock every morning. Over the years, he had trained himself to turn over and go to sleep, but this morning it was Christmas.

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 his father talking to his mother.

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

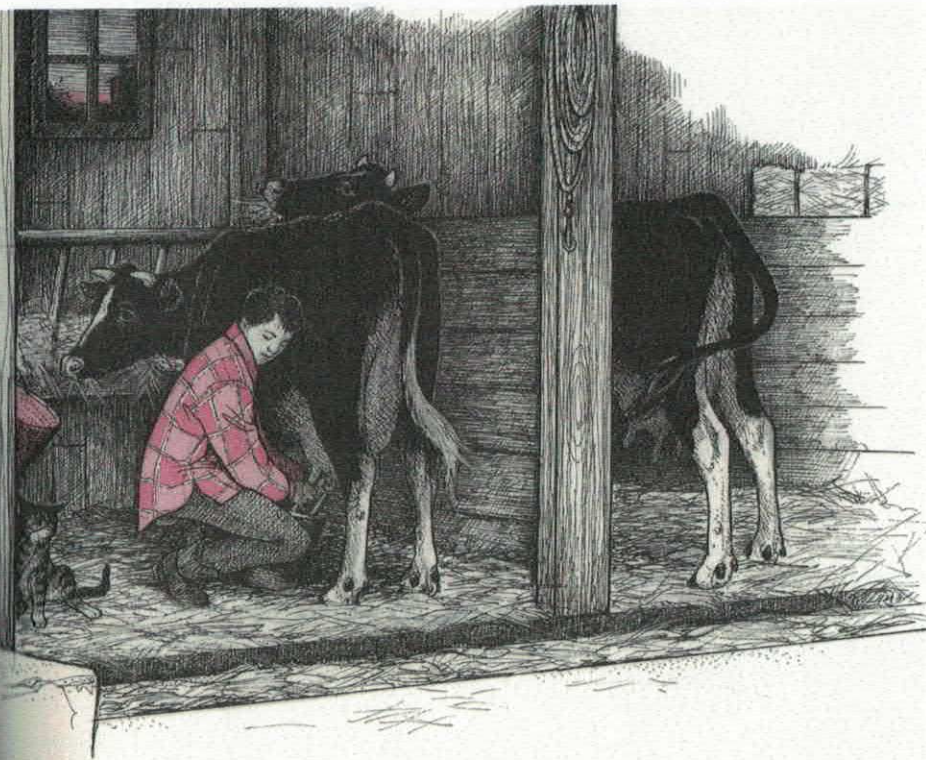
"Well, you can't, Adam." His mother's voice was brisk. "Besides, he isn't a child anymore. It's time he took his turn."

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

When he heard his father's words, something in him spoke: His father loved him! He had never thought of that before, simply 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 always got up immediately after that. He stumbled blindly in his sleep and pulled on his clothes with 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 about Christmas was in the turkey they had raised themselves and the mince pies his mother had made. His sister sewed presents for everyone and his mother and father always bought him something he needed, like a warm jacket, but usually something more too, 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. As he gazed 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 couldn't he 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 do all the milking before his father even got out of bed. He'd do it all alone, milk the cows and clean up, and then when his father went in to start the milking he'd see it all was done. And he would know who had done it. He laughed to himself as he looked at the stars. It was what he would do! He mustn't sleep too sound and forget to get up early.

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

At a quarter to three he got up and put on his clothes. He crept downstairs, careful to avoid 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 to 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 waiting to be filled. But they wouldn't be waiting or empty, they'd be standing in the milk house, filled.

"What on earth!" 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. For once, milking 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 to close 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 and moving around. 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.

His father closed the door 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, it seemed like hours—and he heard his father's footsteps again. When his father opened the door he lay perfectly still.

"Rob!"

"Yes, Dad?"

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

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

"Merry Christmas, Dad!"

He found his father and clutched him in a great hug. He felt his father's arms wrap 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 sister about how he, Rob, had got up all by himself and finished all the milking.

"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 every year, 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 would write it down in a letter for her to read and keep forever. He went to his desk and began to write:
My dearest love . . .

Such a happy, happy, Christmas!



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THE FIR-TREE



by HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN



ut in the woods stood a nice little Fir-tree. The place he had was a very good one; the sun shone on him; as to fresh air, there was enough of that, and round him grew many large-sized comrades, pines as well as firs. But the little Fir wanted so very much to be a grown-up tree.

He did not think of the warm sun and of the fresh air; he did not care for the little cottage children that run about and prattled when they were in the woods looking for wild strawberries. The children often came with a whole pitcherful of berries, or a long row of them threaded on a straw, and sat down near the young Tree and said, "Oh, how pretty he is! What a nice little Fir!" But this was what the Tree could not bear to hear.

At the end of a year he had shot up a good deal, and after another year he was another long bit taller; for with fir-trees one can always tell by the shoots how many years old they are.

"Oh, were I but such a high tree as the others are!" sighed he. "Then I should be able to spread out my branches and with the tops looked into the wide world! Then would the birds build nests among branches; and when there was a breeze I could bend with as much stateliness as the others!"

Neither the sunbeams, nor the birds, nor the red clouds which morning and evening sailed above him gave the little Tree any pleasure.

In winter, when the snow lay glittering on the ground, a hare would often come leaping

along and jump right over the little Tree. Oh, that made him so angry! But two winters were past, and in the third the Tree was so large that the hare was obliged to go around it. "To grow and grow, to get older and be tall," thought the Tree—"that, after all, is the most delightful thing in the world!"

In autumn the woodcutters always came and felled some of the largest trees. This happened every year; and the young Fir-tree, that had now grown to a very comely size, trembled at the sight; for the magnificent great trees fell to the earth with noise and cracking, the branches were lopped off, and the trees looked long and bare; they were hardly to be recognized; and then they were laid in carts, and the horses dragged them out of the wood.

Where did they go to? What became of them?

In spring, when the Swallows and the Storks came, the Tree asked them, "Don't you know where they have been taken? Have you not met them anywhere?"

The Swallows did not know anything about it; but the Stork looked musing, nodded his head, and said, "Yes, I think I know. I met many ships as I was flying hither from Egypt; on the ships were magnificent masts, and I venture to assert that it was they that smelt so of fir. I may congratulate you, for they lifted themselves on high most majestically!"

"Oh, were I but old enough to fly across the sea! But how does the sea look in reality?"

What is it like?"

"That would take a long time to explain," said the Stork; and with these words off he went.

"Rejoice in thy growth!" said the Sunbeams; "rejoice in the vigorous growth and in the fresh life that moveth within thee!"

And the Wind kissed the Tree, and the Dew wept tears over him, but the Fir understood it not.

When Christmas came, quite young trees were cut down, trees which often were not even as large or of the same age as this Fir-tree who could never rest but always wanted to be off. These young trees, and they were always the finest-looking, retained their branches; they were laid on carts, and the horses drew them out of the wood.

"Where are they going to?" asked the Fir. "They are not taller than I; there was one indeed that was considerably shorter—and why do they retain all their branches? Whither are they taken?"

"We know! We know!" chirped the Sparrows. "We have peeped in at the windows in the town below! We know whither they are taken! The greatest splendor and the greatest magnificence one can imagine await them. We peeped through the windows and saw them planted in the middle of the warm room, and ornamented with the most splendid things—with gilded apples, with gingerbread, with toys, and many hundred lights!"

"And then?" asked the Fir-tree, trembling in every bough. "And then? What happens then?"

"We did not see anything more; it was incomparably beautiful."

"I would fain know if I am destined for so glorious a career," cried the Tree, rejoicing.

"That is still better than to cross the sea! What a longing do I suffer! Were Christmas but come! I am now tall, and my branches spread like the others that were carried off last year! Oh, were I but already on the cart! Were I in the warm room with all the splendor and magnificence! Yes; then something better, something still grander, will surely follow, or wherefore should they thus ornament me? Something better, something still grander, *must* follow—but what? Oh, how I long, how I suffer! I do not know myself what is the matter with me!"

"Rejoice in our presence!" said the Air and the Sunlight; "rejoice in thy own fresh youth!"

But the Tree did not rejoice at all; he grew and grew, and was green both winter and summer. People that saw him said, "What a fine tree!" and toward Christmas he was one of the first that was cut down. The ax struck deep into the very pith; the tree fell to the earth with a sigh; he felt a pang—it was like a swoon; he could not think of happiness, for he was sorrowful at being separated from his home, from the place where he had sprung up. He well knew that he should never see his dear old comrades, the little bushes and flowers around him, any more, perhaps not even the birds! The departure was not at all agreeable.

The Tree only came to himself when he was unloaded in a courtyard with the other trees, and heard a man say, "That one is splendid; we don't want the others." Then two servants came in rich livery and carried the Fir-tree into a large and splendid drawing room. Portraits were hanging on the walls, and near the white porcelain stove stood two large Chinese vases with lions on the covers. There, too, were large easy chairs, silken sofas, large tables full of picture books and full of toys



worth hundreds and hundreds of crowns—at least the children said so. And the Fir-tree was stuck upright in a cask that was filled with sand; but no one could see that it was a cask, for green cloth was hung all around it, and it stood on a large, gaily colored carpet. Oh, how the tree quivered! What was to happen? The servants as well as the young ladies decorated it. On one branch there hung little nets cut out of colored paper, and each net was filled with sugarplums; and among the other boughs gilded apples and walnuts were suspended, looking as though they had grown there, and little blue and white tapers were placed among the leaves. Dolls that looked for all the world like men—the Tree had never beheld such before—were seen among the foliage, and at the very top a large star of gold tinsel was fixed. It was really splendid—beyond description splendid.

“This evening!” said they all; “how it will shine this evening!”

“Oh,” thought the Tree, “if the evening were but come! If the tapers were but lighted! And then I wonder what will happen! Perhaps the other trees from the forest will come to look at me! Perhaps the sparrows will beat against the windowpanes! I wonder if I shall

take root here and winter and summer stand covered with ornaments.”

He knew very much about the matter! But he was so impatient that for sheer longing he got a pain in his back, and this with trees is the same thing as a headache with us.

The candles were now lighted. What brightness! What splendor! The Tree trembled so in every bough that one of the tapers set fire to the foliage. It blazed up splendidly.

“Help! help!” cried the young ladies, and they quickly put out the fire.

Now the Tree did not even dare tremble. What a state he was in! He was so uneasy lest he should lose something of his splendor that he was quite bewildered amid the glare and brightness, when suddenly both folding doors opened and a troop of children rushed in as if they would upset the Tree. The older persons followed quietly; the little ones stood quite still. But it was only for a moment; then they shouted so that the whole place re-echoed with their rejoicing; they danced round the Tree, and one present after the other was pulled off.

“What are they about?” thought the Tree. “What is to happen now?” And the lights burned down to the very branches, and as they

burned down they were put out one after the other, and then the children had permission to plunder the Tree. So they fell upon it with such violence that all its branches cracked; if it had not been fixed firmly in the cask it would certainly have tumbled down.

The children danced about with their beautiful playthings; no one looked at the Tree except the old nurse, who peeped between the branches; but it was only to see if there was a fig or an apple left that had been forgotten.

"A story! A story!" cried the children, drawing a little fat man toward the Tree. He seated himself under it and said, "Now we are in the shade, and the Tree can listen too. But I shall tell only one story. Now which will you have: that about Ivedy-Avedy, or about Klumpy-Dumpy who tumbled downstairs, and yet after all came to the throne and married the princess?"

"Ivedy-Avedy," cried some; "Klumpy-Dumpy," cried the others. There was such a bawling and screaming. The Fir-tree alone was silent, and he thought to himself, "Am I not to bawl with the rest—am I to do nothing whatever?" for he was one of the company and had done what he had to do.

And the man told about Klumpy-Dumpy that tumbled down, who notwithstanding came to the throne and at last married the princess. And the children clapped their hands and cried out, "Oh, go on! Do go on!" They wanted to hear about Ivedy-Avedy, too, but the little man only told them about Klumpy-Dumpy. The Fir-tree stood quite still and absorbed in thought; the birds in the wood had never related the like of this. "Klumpy-Dumpy fell downstairs, and yet he married the princess! Yes, yes! That's the way of the world!" thought the Fir-tree, and believed it

all, because the man who told the story was so good-looking. "Well, well! Who knows, perhaps I may fall downstairs, too, and get a princess as wife!" And he looked forward with joy to the morrow, when he hoped to be decked out again with lights, playthings, fruits, and tinsel.

"I won't tremble tomorrow!" thought the Fir-tree. "I will enjoy to the full all my splendor! Tomorrow I shall hear again the story of Klumpy-Dumpy, and perhaps that of Ivedy-Avedy, too." And the whole night the Tree stood still and in deep thought.

In the morning the servant and the housemaid came in.

"Now, then, the splendor will begin again," thought the Fir, but they dragged him out of the room, and up the stairs into the loft; and here in a dark corner, where no daylight could enter, they left him. "What's the meaning of this?" thought the Tree. "What am I to do here? What shall I hear now, I wonder?" And he leaned against the wall, lost in reverie. Time enough had he, too, for his reflections, for days and nights passed on, and nobody came up; and when at last somebody did come it was only to put some great trunks in a corner out of the way. There stood the Tree, quite hidden; it seemed as if he had been entirely forgotten.

"'Tis now winter out-of-doors!" thought the Tree. "The earth is hard and covered with snow; men cannot plant me now, and therefore I have been put up here under shelter till the springtime comes! How thoughtful that is! How kind man is, after all! If it only were not so dark here and so terribly lonely! Not even a hare. And out in the woods it was so pleasant when the snow was on the ground, and the hare leaped by; yes, even

when he jumped over me; but I did not like it then. It is really terribly lonely here!"

"Squeak! Squeak!" said a little Mouse, at the same moment peeping out of his hole. And then another little one came.



They snuffed about the Fir-tree and rustled among the branches.

"It is dreadfully cold," said the Mouse. "But for that it would be delightful here, old Fir, wouldn't it?"

"I am by no means old," said the Fir-tree. "There's many a one considerably older than I am."

"Where do you come from," asked the Mice, "and what can you do?" They were so extremely curious. "Tell us about the most beautiful spot on the earth. Have you never been there? Were you never in the larder

where cheeses lie on the shelves and hams hang from above, where one dances about on tallow candles; that place where one enters lean and comes out again fat and portly?"

"I know no such place," said the Tree. "But I know the wood, where the sun shines, and where the little birds sing." And then he told all about his youth; and the little Mice had never heard the like before; and they listened and said, "Well, to be sure! How much you have seen! How happy you must have been!"

"I!" said the Fir-tree, thinking over what he had himself related. "Yes, in reality those were happy times." And then he told about Christmas Eve, when he was decked out with cakes and candles.

"Oh," said the little Mice, "how fortunate you have been, old Fir-tree!"

"I am by no means old," said he. "I came from the wood this winter; I am in my prime, and am only rather short for my age."

"What delightful stories you know!" said the Mice; and the next night they came with four other little Mice, who were to hear what the Tree recounted; and the more he related the more plainly he remembered all himself; and it appeared as if those times had really been happy times. "But they may still come—they may still come. Klumpy-Dumpy fell downstairs, and yet he got a princess!" And he thought at the moment of a nice little Birch-tree growing out in the wood; to the Fir that would be a real charming princess.

"Who is Klumpy-Dumpy?" asked the Mice. So then the Fir-tree told the whole fairy tale, for he could remember every single word of it; and the little Mice jumped for joy up to the very top of the Tree. Next night two more Mice came, and on Sunday two Rats, even;

but they said the stories were not interesting, which vexed the little Mice; and they, too, now began to think them not so very amusing, either.

“Do you know only one story?” asked the Rats.

“Only that one,” answered the Tree. “I heard it on my happiest evening; but I did not then know how happy I was.”

“It is a very stupid story! Don’t you know one about bacon and tallow candles? Can’t you tell any larder stories?”

“No,” said the Tree.

“Then good-by,” said the Rats; and they went home.

At last the little Mice stayed away also; and the Tree sighed. “After all, it was very pleasant when the sleek little Mice sat around me and listened to what I told them. Now that, too, is over. But I will take good care to enjoy myself when I am brought out again.”

But when was that to be? Why, one morning there came a quantity of people and set to work in the loft. The trunks were moved, the Tree was pulled out and thrown—rather hard, it is true—down on the floor, but a man drew him toward the stairs, where the daylight shone.

“Now a merry life will begin again,” thought the Tree. He felt the fresh air, the first sunbeam—and now he was out in the courtyard. All passed so quickly, there was so much going on around him, that the Tree quite forgot to look to himself. The court adjoined a garden, and all was in flower; the roses hung so fresh and odorous over the balustrade, the lindens were in blossom, the Swallows flew by and said, “Quirre-vit! My husband is come!” but it was not the Fir-tree that they meant.

“Now, then, I shall really enjoy life,” said

he, exultingly, and spread out his branches; but alas! they were all withered and yellow. It was in a corner that he lay, among weeds and nettles. The golden star of tinsel was still on the top of the Tree, and glittered in the sunshine.

In the courtyard some of the merry children were playing who had danced at Christmas round the Fir-tree and were so glad at the sight of him. One of the youngest ran and tore off the golden star.

“Only look what is still on the ugly old Christmas tree!” said he, trampling on the branches so that they all cracked beneath his feet.


And the tree beheld all the beauty of the flowers and the freshness in the garden; he beheld himself and wished he had remained in his dark corner in the loft; he thought of his first youth in the wood, of the merry Christmas Eve, and of the little Mice who had listened with so much pleasure to the story of Klumpy-Dumpy.

“’Tis over! ’Tis past!” said the poor Tree. “Had I but rejoiced when I had reason to do so! But now ’tis past, ’tis past!”

And the gardner’s boy chopped the Tree into small pieces; there was a heap lying there. The wood flamed up splendidly under the large brewing cauldron, and it sighed so deeply! Each sigh was like a shot.

The boys played about in the court, and the youngest wore the gold star on his breast which the Tree had had on the happiest evening of his life. However, that was over now—the Tree gone, the story at an end. All, all was over; every tale must end at last.



The
Family Book Of
Christmas
Songs & Stories 

by
Jim Charlton
and Jason Shulman

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THE LITTLE MATCH-GIRL

by HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN

Lt was terribly cold; it snowed and was already almost dark, and evening came on, the last evening of the year. In the cold and gloom a poor little girl, bareheaded and barefoot, was walking through the streets. When she left her own house she certainly had had slippers on, but of what use were they? They were very big slippers, and her mother had used them till then, so big were they. The little maid lost them as she slipped across the road, where two carriages were rattling by terribly fast. One slipper was not to be found again, and a boy had seized the other and run away with it. He thought he could use it very well as a cradle some day when he had children of his own. So now the little girl went with her little naked feet, which were quite red and blue with cold. In an old apron she carried a number of matches, and a bundle of them in her hand. No one had bought anything of her all day, and no one had given her a farthing.



Shivering with cold and hunger, she crept along, a picture of misery, poor little girl! The snowflakes covered her long fair hair, which fell in pretty curls over her neck; but she did not think of that now. In all the windows lights were shining, and there was a glorious smell of roast goose, for it was New Year's Eve. Yes, she thought of that!

In a corner formed by two houses, one of which projected beyond the other, she sat down, cowering. She had drawn up her little feet, but she was still colder, and she did not dare to go home, for she had sold no matches and did not bring a farthing of money. From her father she would certainly receive a beating; and, besides, it was cold at home, for they had nothing over them but a roof through which the wind whistled, though the largest rents had been stopped with straw and rags.

Her little hands were almost benumbed with the cold. Ah, a match might do her good, if she could only draw one from the bundle and rub it against the wall and warm her hands at it. She drew one out. R-r-atch! how it sputtered and burned! It was a warm, bright flame, like a little candle, when she held her hands over it; it was a wonderful little light! It really seemed to the little girl as if she sat before a great polished stove with bright brass feet and a brass cover. How the fire burned! How comfortable it was! But the little flame went out, the stove vanished, and she had only the remains of the burnt match in her hand.



A second was rubbed against the wall. It burned up, and when the light fell upon the wall it became transparent like a thin veil, and she could see through it into the room. On the table a snow-white cloth was spread; upon it stood a shining dinner service; the roast goose smoked gloriously, stuffed with apples and dried plums. And, what was still more splendid to behold, the goose hopped down from the dish and waddled

along the floor, with a knife and fork in its breast, to the little girl. Then the match went out and only the thick, damp, cold wall was before her. She lighted another match. Then she was sitting under a beautiful Christmas tree; it was greater and more ornamented than the one she had seen through the glass door at the rich merchant's. Thousands of candles burned upon the green branches, and colored pictures like those in the print shops looked down upon them. The little girl stretched forth her hand toward them; then the match went out. The Christmas lights mounted higher. She saw them now as stars in the sky; one of them fell down, forming a long line of fire.

"Now someone is dying," thought the little girl, for her old grandmother, the only person who had loved her, and who was now dead, had told her that when a star fell down a soul mounted up to God.

She rubbed another match against the wall; it became bright again, and in the brightness the old grandmother stood clear and shining, mild and lovely.


"Grandmother!" cried the child. "Oh, take me with you! I know you will go when the match is burned out. You will vanish like the warm fire, the warm food, and the great glorious Christmas tree!"

And she hastily rubbed the whole bundle of matches, for she wished to hold her grandmother fast. And the matches burned with such a glow that it became brighter than in the middle of the day; grandmother had never been so large or so

in brightness and joy above the earth, very, very high, and up there was neither cold, nor hunger, nor care—they were with God.



But in the corner, leaning against the wall, sat the poor girl with red cheeks and smiling mouth, frozen to death on the last evening of the old year. The New Year's sun rose upon a little corpse! The child sat there, stiff and cold, with the matches, of which one bundle was burned. "She wanted to warm herself," the people said. No one imagined what a beautiful thing she had seen and in what glory she had gone in with her grandmother to the New Year's Day.

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A KIDNAPPED SANTA CLAUS

from *The Delineator*, Vol. LXIV

by L. FRANK BAUM



Santa Claus lives in the Laughing Valley, where stands the big rambling castle in which his toys are manufactured. His workmen, selected from the ryls, knooks, pixies and fairies, live with him, and every one is as busy as can be from one year's end to another.

It is called the Laughing Valley because everything there is happy and gay. The brook chuckles to itself as it leaps rollicking between its green banks; the wind whistles merrily in the trees; the sunbeams dance lightly over the soft grass, and the violets and wildflowers look smilingly up from their green nests. To laugh one needs to be happy; to be happy one needs to be content. And throughout the Laughing Valley of Santa Claus contentment reigns supreme.

On one side is the mighty Forest of Burzee. At the other side stands the huge mountain that contains the Caves of the Daemons. And between them the Valley lies smiling and peaceful.

One would think that our good old Santa Claus, who devotes his days to making children happy, would have no enemies on all the earth; and, as a matter of fact, for a long period of time he encountered nothing but love wherever he might go.

But the Daemons who live in the mountain caves grew to hate Santa Claus very much, and all for the simple reason that he made children happy.

The Caves of the Daemons are five in num-

ber. A broad pathway leads up to the first cave, which is a finely arched cavern at the foot of the mountain, the entrance being beautifully carved and decorated. In it resides the Daemon of Selfishness. Back of this is another cavern inhabited by the Daemon of Envy. The cave of the Daemon of Hatred is next in order, and through this, one passes to the home of the Daemon of Malice—situated in a dark and fearful cave in the very heart of the mountain. I do not know what lies beyond this. Some say there are terrible pitfalls leading to death and destruction, and this may very well be true. However, from each one of the four caves mentioned there is a small, narrow tunnel leading to the fifth cave—a cozy little room occupied by the Daemon of Repentance. And as the rocky floors of these passages are well worn by the track of passing feet, I judge that many wanderers in the Caves of the Daemons have escaped through the tunnels to the abode of the Daemon of Repentance, who is said to be a pleasant sort of fellow who gladly opens for one a little door admitting you into fresh air and sunshine again.

Well, these Daemons of the Caves, thinking they had great cause to dislike old Santa Claus, held a meeting one day to discuss the matter.

"I'm really getting lonesome," said the Daemon of Selfishness. "For Santa Claus distributes so many pretty Christmas gifts to all the children that they become happy and generous, through his example, and keep away from my cave."

"I'm having the same trouble," rejoined the Daemon of Envy. "The little ones seem quite content with Santa Claus, and there are few, indeed, that I can coax to become envious."

"And that makes it bad for me!" declared the Daemon of Hatred. For if no children pass through the caves of Selfishness and Envy, none can get to *my* cavern."

"Or to mine," added the Daemon of Malice.

"For my part," said the Daemon of Repentance, "it is easily seen that if children do not visit your caves they have no need to visit mine; so I am quite as neglected as you are."

"And all because of this person they call Santa Claus!" exclaimed the Daemon of Envy. "He is simply ruining our business, and something must be done at once."

To this they readily agreed; but what to do was another and more difficult matter to settle. They knew that Santa Claus worked all through the year at his castle in the Laughing Valley, preparing the gifts he was to distribute on Christmas Eve; and at first they resolved to try to tempt him into their caves, that they might lead him on to the terrible pitfalls that ended in destruction.

So the very next day, while Santa Claus was busily at work, surrounded by his little band of assistants, the Daemon of Selfishness came to him and said, "These toys are wonderfully bright and pretty. Why do you not keep them for yourself? It's a pity to give them to those noisy boys and fretful girls, who break and destroy them so quickly."

"Nonsense!" cried the old graybeard, his bright eyes twinkling merrily as he turned toward the tempting Daemon; "the boys and girls are never so noisy and fretful after receiving my presents, and if I can make them

happy for one day in the year I am quite content."



So the Daemon went back to the others, who awaited him in their caves, and said, "I have failed, for Santa Claus is not at all selfish."

The following day the Daemon of Envy visited Santa Claus. Said he, "The toy-shops are full of playthings quite as pretty as these you are making. What a shame it is that they should interfere with your business! They make toys by machinery much quicker than you can make them by hand; and they sell them for money, while you get nothing at all for your work."

But Santa Claus refused to be envious of the toy-shops.

"I can supply the little ones but once a year—on Christmas Eve," he answered; "for the children are many, and I am but one. And as my work is one of love and kindness I

would be ashamed to receive money for my little gifts. But throughout all the year the children must be amused in some way, and so the toy-shops are able to bring much happiness to my little friends. I like the toy-shops, and am glad to see them prosper."

In spite of this second rebuff, the Daemon of Hatred thought he would try to influence Santa Claus. So the next day he entered the busy workshop and said, "Good morning, Santa! I have bad news for you."

"Then run away, like a good fellow," answered Santa Claus. "Bad news is something that should be kept secret and never told."

"You cannot escape this, however," declared the Daemon; "for in the world are a good many who do not believe in Santa Claus, and these you are bound to hate bitterly, since they have so wronged you."

"Stuff and rubbish!" cried Santa.

"And there are others who resent your making children happy and who sneer at you and call you a foolish old rattlepate! You are quite right to hate such base slanderers, and you ought to be revenged upon them for their evil words."

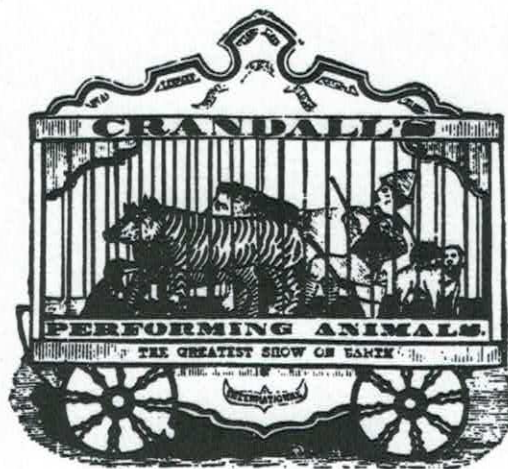
"But I *don't* hate 'em!" exclaimed Santa Claus, positively. "Such people do me no real harm, but merely render themselves and their children unhappy. Poor things! I'd much rather help them any day than injure them."

Indeed, the Daemons could not tempt old Santa Claus in any way. On the contrary, he was shrewd enough to see that their object in visiting him was to make mischief and trouble. So the Daemons abandoned honeyed words and determined to use force.

It is well known that no harm can come to Santa Claus while he is in the Laughing Valley, for the faries, and ryls, and knooks all protect

him. But on Christmas Eve he drives his reindeer out into the big world, carrying a sleigh-load of toys and pretty gifts to the children; and this was the time and the occasion when his enemies had the best chance to injure him. So the Daemons laid their plans and awaited the arrival of Christmas Eve.

The moon shone big and white in the sky, and the snow lay crisp and sparkling on the ground as Santa Claus cracked his whip and sped away out of the Valley into the great world beyond. The roomy sleigh was packed full with huge sacks of toys, and as the reindeer dashed onward our jolly old Santa laughed and whistled and sang for very joy. For in all his merry life this was the one day in the year when he was happiest—the day he lovingly bestowed the treasures on his workshop upon the little children.



It would be a busy night for him, he well knew. As he whistled and shouted and cracked his whip again, he reviewed in mind all the towns and cities and farm-houses where he was expected, and figured that he had just enough presents to go around and make every child happy. The reindeer knew exactly what was expected of them, and dashed along so

swiftly that their feet scarcely seemed to touch the snow-covered ground.

Suddenly a strange thing happened: a rope shot through the moonlight and a big noose that was in the end of it settled over the arms and body of Santa Claus and drew tight. Before he could resist or even cry out he was jerked from the seat of the sleigh and tumbled head foremost into a snowbank, while the reindeer rushed onward with the load of toys and carried it quickly out of sight and sound.

Such a surprising experience confused old Santa for a moment, and when he had collected his senses he found that the wicked Daemons had pulled him from the snowdrift and bound him tightly with many coils of the stout rope. And then they carried the kidnapped Santa Claus away to their mountain, where they thrust the prisoner into a secret cave and chained him to the rocky wall so that he could not escape.

"Ha, ha!" laughed the Daemons, rubbing their hands together with cruel glee. "What will the children do now? How they will cry and scold and storm when they find there are no toys in their stockings and no gifts on their Christmas trees! And what a lot of punishment they will receive from their parents, and how they will flock to our caves of Selfishness, and Envy, and Hatred, and Malice! We have done a mighty clever thing, we Daemons of the Caves!"

Now it so chanced that on this Christmas Eve the good Santa Claus had taken with him in his sleigh Nuter the Ryl, Peter the Knook, Kilter the Pixie, and a small fairy named Wisk—his four favorite assistants. These little people he had often found very useful in helping him to distribute his gifts to the children,

and when their master was so suddenly dragged from the sleigh they were all snugly tucked underneath the seat, where the sharp wind could not reach them.

The tiny immortals knew nothing of the capture of Santa Claus until some time after he had disappeared. But finally they missed his cheery voice, and as their master always sang or whistled on his journeys, the silence warned them that something was wrong.

Little Wisk stuck out his head from underneath the seat and found Santa Claus gone and no one to direct the flight of the reindeer.

"Whoa!" he called out, and the deer obediently slackened speed and came to a halt.

Peter and Nuter and Kilter all jumped upon the seat and looked back over the track made by the sleigh. But Santa Claus had been left miles and miles behind.

"What shall we do?" asked Wisk, anxiously, all the mirth and mischief banished from his wee face by this great calamity.

"We must go back at once and find our master," said Nuter the Ryl, who thought and spoke with much deliberation.

"No, no!" exclaimed Peter the Knook, who cross and crabbed though he was, might always be depended upon in an emergency. "If we delay, or go back, there will not be time to get the toys to the children before morning; and that would grieve Santa Claus more than anything else."

"It is certain that some wicked creatures have captured him," added Kilter, thoughtfully; "and their object must be to make the children unhappy. So our first duty is to get the toys distributed as carefully as if Santa Claus were himself present. Afterward we can search for our master and easily secure his freedom."

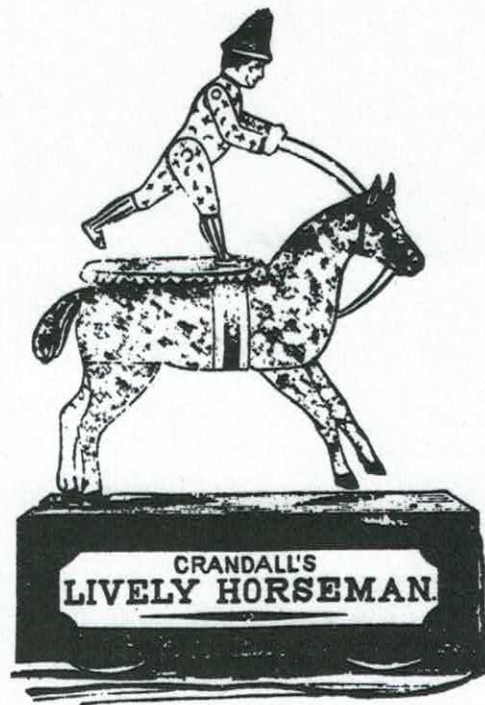
This seemed such good and sensible advice that the others at once resolved to adopt it. So Peter the Knook called to the reindeer, and the faithful animals again sprang forward and dashed over hill and valley, through forest and plain, until they came to the house wherein children lay sleeping and dreaming of the pretty gifts they would find on Christmas morning.

The little immortals had set themselves a difficult task; for although they had assisted Santa Claus on many of his journeys, their master had always directed and guided them and told them exactly what he wished them to do. But now they had to distribute the toys according to their own judgment, and they did not understand children as well as did old Santa. So it is no wonder they made some laughable errors.

Mamie Brown, who wanted a doll, got a drum instead; and a drum is of no use to a girl who loves dolls. And Charlie Smith, who delights to romp and play out of doors, and who wanted some new rubber boots to keep his feet dry, received a sewing-box filled with colored worsteds and threads and needles, which made him so provoked that he thoughtlessly called our dear Santa Claus a fraud.

Had there been many such mistakes the Daemons would have accomplished their evil purpose and made the children unhappy. But the little friends of the absent Santa Claus labored faithfully and intelligently to carry out their master's ideas, and they made fewer errors than might be expected under such unusual circumstances.

And, although they worked as swiftly as possible, day had begun to break before the toys and other presents were all distributed; so for the first time in many years the reindeer trotted into the Laughing Valley, on their



return, in broad daylight, with the brilliant sun peeping over the edge of the forest to prove they were far behind their accustomed hour.

Having put the deer in the stable, the little folk began to wonder how they might rescue their master; and they realized they must discover, first of all, what had happened to him and where he was.

So Wisk the Fairy transported himself to the bower of the Fairy Queen, which was located deep in the heart of the Forest of Burzee; and once there, it did not take him long to find out all about the naughty Daemons and how they had kidnapped the good Santa Claus to prevent his making children happy. The Fairy Queen also promised her assistance, and then, fortified by this powerful support, Wisk flew back to where Nuter and Peter and Kilter awaited him, and the four counselled together and laid plans to rescue their master from his enemies.

It is possible that Santa Claus was not as merry as usual during the night that succeeded

his capture. For although he had faith in the judgment of his little friends he could not avoid a certain amount of worry, and an anxious look would creep at times into his kind old eyes as he thought of the disappointment that might await his dear little children. And the Daemons, who guarded him by turns, one after another, did not neglect to taunt him with contemptuous words in his helpless condition.

When Christmas Day dawned the Daemon of Malice was guarding the prisoner, and his tongue was sharper than that of any of the others.

"The children are waking up, Santa!" he cried; "they are waking up to find their stockings empty! Ho, ho! How they will quarrel, and wail, and stamp their feet in anger! Our caves will be full to-day, old Santa! Our caves are sure to be full!"

But to this, as to other like taunts, Santa Claus answered nothing. He was much grieved by his capture, it is true; but his courage did not forsake him. And, finding that the prisoner would not reply to his jeers, the Daemon of Malice presently went away, and sent the Daemon of Repentance to take his place.

This last personage was not so disagreeable as the others. He had gentle and refined features, and his voice was soft and pleasant in tone.

"My brother Daemons do not trust me over-much," said he, as he entered the cavern; "but it is morning, now, and the mischief is done. You cannot visit the children again for another year."

"That is true," answered Santa Claus, almost cheerfully; "Christmas Eve is past, and for the first time in centuries I have not visited my children."

"The little ones will be greatly disappointed," murmured the Daemon of Repentance, almost regretfully, "but that cannot be helped now. Their grief is likely to make the children selfish and envious and hateful, and if they come to the Caves of the Daemons today I shall get a chance to lead some of them to my Cave of Repentance."

"Do you never repent, yourself?" asked Santa Claus, curiously.

"Oh, yes, indeed," answered the Daemon. "I am even now repenting that I assisted in your capture. Of course it is too late to remedy the evil that has been done; but repentance, you know, can come only after an evil thought or deed, for in the beginning there is nothing to repent of."

"So I understand," said Santa Claus. "Those who avoid evil need never visit your cave."

"As a rule, that is true," replied the Daemon; "yet you, who have done no evil, are about to visit my cave at once; for to prove that I sincerely regret my share in your capture I am going to permit you to escape."

This speech greatly surprised the prisoner, until he reflected that it was just what might be expected of the Daemon of Repentance. The fellow at once busied himself untying the knots that bound Santa Claus and unlocking the chains that fastened him to the wall. Then he led the way through a long tunnel until they both emerged in the Cave of Repentance.

"I hope you will forgive me," said the Daemon, pleadingly. "I am not really a bad person, you know; and I believe I accomplish a great deal of good in the world."

With this he opened a back door that let in a flood of sunshine, and Santa Claus sniffed the fresh air gratefully.

"I bear no malice," said he to the Daemon,



SANTA
CLAUS
STOP
HERE
PLEASE

SANTA
CLAUS
EXPRESS

Nal

in a gentle voice; "and I am sure the world would be a dreary place without you. So, good morning, and a Merry Christmas to you!"

With these words he stepped out to greet the bright morning, and a moment later he was trudging along, whistling softly to himself, on his way to his home in the Laughing Valley.

Marching over the snow toward the mountain was a vast army, made up of the most curious creatures imaginable. There were numberless knooks from the forests, as rough and crooked in appearance as the gnarled branches of the trees they ministered to. And there were dainty ryls from the fields, each one bearing the emblem of the flower or plant it guarded. Behind these were many ranks of pixies, gnomes and nymphs, and in the rear a thousand beautiful fairies floating along in gorgeous array.

This wonderful army was led by Wisk, Peter, Nuter and Kilter, who had assembled it to rescue Santa Claus from captivity and to punish the Daemons who had dared to take him away from his beloved children.

And, although they looked so bright and peaceful, the little immortals were armed with powers that would be very terrible to those who had incurred their anger. Woe to the Daemons of the Caves if this mighty army of vengeance ever met them!

But lo! Coming to meet his loyal friends appeared the imposing form of Santa Claus, his white beard floating in the breeze and his bright eyes sparkling with pleasure at this proof of the love and veneration he had inspired in the hearts of the most powerful creatures in existence.

And while they clustered around him and danced with glee at his safe return, he gave them earnest thanks for their support. But

Wisk, and Nuter, and Peter, and Kilter, he embraced affectionately.

"It is useless to pursue the Daemons," said Santa Claus to the army. "They have their place in the world, and can never be destroyed. But that is a great pity, nevertheless," he continued, musingly.


So the fairies, and knooks, and pixies, and ryls all escorted the good man to his castle, and there left him to talk over the events of the night with his little assistants.

Wisk had already rendered himself invisible and flown through the big world to see how the children were getting along on this bright Christmas morning; and by the time he returned, Peter had finished telling Santa Claus of how they had distributed the toys.

"We really did very well," cried the Fairy, in a pleased voice; "for I found little unhappiness among the children this morning. Still, you must not get captured again, my dear master, for we might not be so fortunate another time in carrying out your ideas."

He then related the mistakes that had been made, and which he had not discovered until his tour of inspection. And Santa Claus at once sent him with rubber boots for Charlie Smith, and a doll for Mamie Brown; so that even those two disappointed ones became happy.

As for the Wicked Daemons of the Caves, they were filled with anger and chagrin when they found that their clever capture of Santa Clause had come to naught. Indeed, no one on that Christmas Day appeared to be at all selfish, or envious, or hateful. And, realizing that while the children's saint had so many powerful friends it was folly to oppose him, the Daemons never again attempted to interfere with his journeys on Christmas Eve.

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Jim Charlton
and Jason Shulman

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CHRISTMAS AT ORCHARD HOUSE

by LOUISA MAY ALCOTT




"Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents," grumbled Jo, lying on the rug.

"It's so dreadful to be poor!" sighed Meg, looking down at her old dress.

"I don't think it's fair for some girls to have plenty of pretty things, and other girls nothing at all," added little Amy, with an injured sniff.

"We've got father and mother and each other," said Beth contentedly, from her corner.



The four young faces on which the fire-light shone brightened at the cheerful words, but darkened again as Jo said sadly,—

"We haven't got father, and shall not have him for a long time." She didn't say "perhaps never," but each silently added it, thinking of father far away, where the fighting was.

Nobody spoke for a minute; then Meg said in an altered tone, "You know the reason mother proposed not having any presents this Christmas was because it is going to be a hard winter for everyone; and she thinks we ought not to spend money for pleasure, when our men are suffering so in the army. We can't do much, but we can make our little sacrifices, and ought to do it gladly. But I am afraid I don't." And Meg shook her head, as she thought regretfully of all the pretty things she wanted.

"But I don't think the little we should spend would do any good. We've each got a dollar, and the army wouldn't be much helped by our giving that. I agree not to expect anything from mother or you, but I do

want to buy *Undine and Sintram* for myself; I've wanted to so long," said Jo, who was a bookworm.

"I planned to spend mine in new music," said Beth, with a little sigh, which no one heard but the hearth brush and kettle holder.

"I shall get a nice box of Faber's drawing-pencils; I really need them," said Amy decidedly.

"Mother didn't say anything about our money, and she won't wish us to give up everything. Let's each buy what we want, and have a little fun; I'm sure we work hard enough to earn it," cried Jo, examining the heels of her shoes in a gentlemanly manner.

"I know I do—teaching those tiresome children nearly all day, when I'm longing to enjoy myself at home," began Meg, in the complaining tone again.

"You don't have half such a hard time as I do," said Jo. "How would you like to be shut up for hours with a nervous, fussy old lady, who keeps you trotting, is never satisfied, and worries you till you're ready to fly out of the window or cry?"

"It's naughty to fret; but I do think washing dishes and keeping things tidy is the worst work in the world. It makes me cross; and my hands get so stiff, I can't practise well at all"; and Beth looked at her rough hands with a sigh that anyone could hear that time.

"I don't believe any of you suffer as I do," cried Amy; "for you don't have to go to school with impertinent girls, who plague you if you don't know your lessons, and

laugh at your dresses, and label your father if he isn't rich, and insult you when your nose isn't nice."

"If you mean *libel*, I'd say so, and not talk about *labels*, as if papa was a pickle bottle," advised Jo, laughing.

"I know what I mean, and you needn't be *statirical* about it. It's proper to use good words, and improve your *vocabulary*," returned Amy, with dignity.

"Don't peck at one another, children. Don't you wish we had the money papa lost when we were little, Jo? Dear me! how happy and good we'd be, if we had no worries!" said Meg, who could remember better times.

"You said, the other day, you thought we were a deal happier than the King children, for they were fighting and fretting all the time, in spite of their money."

"So I did, Beth. Well, I think we are; for, though we do have to work, we make fun for ourselves, and are a pretty jolly set, as Jo would say."

"Jo does use such slang words!" observed Amy, with a reproving look at the long figure stretched on the rug. Jo immediately sat up, put her hands in her pockets, and began to whistle.

"Don't, Jo; it's so boyish!"

"That's why I do it."

"I detest rude, unladylike girls!"

"I hate affected, niminy-piminy chits!"

"Birds in their little nests agree," sang Beth, the peacemaker, with such a funny face that both sharp voices softened to a laugh, and the "pecking" ended for that time.

"Really, girls, you are both to be blamed," said Meg, beginning to lecture in her elder-sisterly fashion. "You are old enough to leave off boyish tricks, and to behave better, Jose-

phine. It didn't matter so much when you were a little girl; but now you are so tall, and turn up your hair, you should remember that you are a young lady."

"I'm not! and if turning up my hair makes me one, I'll wear it in two tails till I'm twenty," cried Jo, pulling off her net, and shaking down a chestnut mane. "I hate to think I've got to grow up, and be Miss March, and wear long gowns, and look as prim as a China-aster! It's bad enough to be a girl, anyway, when I like boys' games and work and manners! I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy; and it's worse than ever now, for I'm dying to go and fight with papa, and I can only stay at home and knit, like a poky old woman!" And Jo shook the blue army sock till the needles rattled like castanets, and her ball bounded across the room.

"Poor Jo! It's too bad, but it can't be helped; so you must try to be contented with making your name boyish, and playing brother to us girls," said Beth, stroking the rough head at her knee with a hand that all the dishwashing and dusting in the world could not make ungentle in its touch.

"As for you, Amy," continued Meg, "you are altogether too particular and prim. Your airs are funny now; but you'll grow up an affected little goose, if you don't take care. I like your nice manners and refined ways of speaking, when you don't try to be elegant; but your absurd words are as bad as Jo's slang."

"If Jo is a tomboy and Amy a goose, what am I, please?" asked Beth, ready to share the lecture.

"You're a dear, and nothing else," answered Meg warmly; and no one contradicted her, for the "Mouse" was the pet of the family.

As young readers like to know, "how people





Marcella Walker

look," we will take this moment to give them a little sketch of the four sisters, who sat knitting away in the twilight, while the December snow fell quietly without, and the fire crackled cheerfully within. It was a comfortable old room, though the carpet was faded and the furniture very plain; for a good picture or two hung on the walls, books filled the recesses, chrysanthemums and Christmas roses bloomed in the windows, and a pleasant atmosphere of home-peace pervaded it.

Margaret, the eldest of the four, was sixteen, and very pretty, being plump and fair, with large eyes, plenty of soft, brown hair, a sweet mouth, and white hands, of which she was rather vain. Fifteen-year-old Jo was very tall, thin, and brown, and reminded one of a colt; for she never seemed to know what to do with her long limbs, which were very much in her way. She had a decided mouth, a comical nose, and sharp, gray eyes, which appeared to see everything, and were by turns fierce, funny, or thoughtful. Her long, thick hair was her one beauty; but it was usually bundled into a net, to be out of her way. Round shoulders had Jo, big hands and feet, a fly-away look to her clothes, and the uncomfortable appearance of a girl who was rapidly shooting up into a woman, and didn't like it. Elizabeth—or Beth, as everyone called her—was a rosy, smooth-haired, bright-eyed girl of thirteen, with a shy manner, a timid voice, and a peaceful expression, which was seldom disturbed. Her father called her "Little Tranquillity," and the name suited her excellently; for she seemed to live in a happy world of her own, only venturing out to meet the few whom she trusted and loved. Amy, though the youngest, was a most important person—in her own opinion at least. A regular snow-maiden, with

blue eyes, and yellow hair, curling on her shoulders, pale and slender, and always carrying herself like a young lady mindful of her manners. What the characters of the four sisters were we will leave to be found out.

The clock struck six; and, having swept up the hearth, Beth put a pair of slippers down to warm. Somehow the sight of the old shoes had a good effect upon the girls; for mother was coming, and everyone brightened to welcome her. Meg stopped lecturing, and lighted the lamp. Amy got out of the easy chair without being asked, and Jo forgot how tired she was as she sat up to hold the slippers nearer to the blaze.

"They are quite worn out; Marmee must have a new pair."

"I thought I'd get her some with my dollar," said Beth.

"No, I shall!" cried Amy.

"I'm the oldest," began Meg, but Jo cut in with a decided—"I'm the man of the family now papa is away, and I shall provide the slippers, for he told me to take special care of mother while he was gone."

"I'll tell you what we'll do," said Beth; "let's each get her something for Christmas, and not get anything for ourselves."

"That's like you, dear! What will we get?" exclaimed Jo.

Everyone thought soberly for a minute; then Meg announced, as if the idea was suggested by the sight of her own pretty hands, "I shall give her a nice pair of gloves."

"Army shoes, best to be had," cried Jo.

"Some handkerchiefs, all hemmed," said Beth.

"I'll get a little bottle of cologne; she likes it, and it won't cost much, so I'll have some left to buy my pencils," added Amy.

"How will we give the things?" asked Meg.

"Put them on the table, and bring her in and see her open the bundles. Don't you remember how we used to do on our birthdays?" answered Jo.

"I used to be *so* frightened when it was my turn to sit in the big chair with the crown on, and see you all come marching round to give the presents, with a kiss. I liked the things and the kisses, but it was dreadful to have you sit looking at me while I opened the bundles," said Beth, who was toasting her face and the bread for tea, at the same time.

"Let Marmee think we are getting things for ourselves, and then surprise her. We must go shopping tomorrow afternoon, Meg; there is so much to do about the play for Christmas night," said Jo, marching up and down, with her hands behind her back and her nose in the air.

"I don't mean to act any more after this time; I'm getting too old for such things," observed Meg, who was as much a child as ever about "dressing-up" frolics.

"You won't stop, I know, as long as you can trail round in a white gown with your hair down, and wear gold-paper jewelry. You are the best actress we've got, and there'll be an end of everything if you quit the boards," said Jo. "We ought to rehearse tonight. Come here, Amy, and do the fainting scene, for you are as stiff as a poker in that."

"I can't help it, I never saw anyone faint, and I don't choose to make myself all black and blue, tumbling flat as you do. If I can go down easily, I'll drop; if I can't I shall fall into a chair and be graceful; I don't care if Hugo does come at me with a pistol," returned Amy, who was not gifted with dramatic power, but was chosen because she was small enough to

be borne out shrieking by the villain of the piece.

"Do it this way; clasp your hands so, and stagger across the room, crying frantically, 'Roderigo! save me! save me!'" and away went Jo, with a melodramatic scream which was truly thrilling.

Amy followed, but she poked her hands out stiffly before her, and jerked herself along as if she went by machinery; and her "Ow!" was more suggestive of pins being run into her than of fear and anguish. Jo gave a despairing groan, and Meg laughed outright, while Beth let her bread burn as she watched the fun, with interest.

"It's no use! Do the best you can when the time comes, and if the audience laughs, don't blame me. Come on, Meg."

Then things went smoothly, for Don Pedro defied the world in a speech of two pages without a single break; Hagar, the witch, chanted an awful incantation over her kettleful of simmering toads, with weird effect; Roderigo rent his chains asunder manfully, and Hugo died in agonies of remorse and arsenic, with a wild "Ha! ha!"

"It's the best we've had yet," said Meg, as the dead villain sat up and rubbed his elbows.

"I don't see how you can write and act such splendid things, Jo. You're a regular Shakespeare!" exclaimed Beth, who firmly believed that her sisters were gifted with wonderful genius in all things.

"Not quite," replied Jo modestly. "I do think, 'The Witch's Curse, an Operatic Tragedy' is rather a nice thing; but I'd like to try 'Macbeth,' if we only had a trap door for Banquo. I always wanted to do the killing part. 'Is that a dagger that I see before me?'" muttered Jo, rolling her eyes and clutching at



the air, as she had seen a famous tragedian do.

"No, it's the toasting fork, with mother's shoe on it instead of the bread. Beth's stage-struck!" cried Meg, and the rehearsal ended in a general burst of laughter.



Jo was the first to wake in the gray dawn of Christmas morning. No stockings hung at the fireplace, and for a moment she felt as much disappointed as she did long ago, when her little sock fell down because it was so crammed with goodies. Then she remembered her mother's promise, and, slipping her hand under her pillow, drew out a little crimson-covered book. She knew it very well, for it was that beautiful old story of the best life ever lived, and Jo felt that it was a true guidebook for any pilgrim going the long journey. She woke Meg with a "Merry Christmas," and bade her see what was under her pillow. A green-covered book appeared with the same picture inside, and a few words written by their mother, which made their one present very precious in their eyes. Presently Beth and Amy woke, to rummage and find their little books also—one dove-colored, the other blue; and all sat looking at and talking about them, while the east grew rosy with the coming day. In spite of her small vanities, Margaret had a sweet and pious nature, which unconsciously influenced her sisters, especially Jo, who loved her very tenderly, and obeyed her because her advice was so gently given.

"Girls," said Meg seriously, looking from the tumbled head beside her to the two little night-capped ones in the room beyond, "mother wants us to read and love and mind these books, and we must begin at once. We

used to be faithful about it; but since father went away, and all this war trouble unsettled us, we have neglected many things. You can do as you please; but *I* shall keep my book on the table here, and read a little every morning as soon as I wake, for I know it will do me good, and help me through the day."

Then she opened her new book and began to read. Jo put her arm around her, and, leaning cheek to cheek, read also, with the quiet expression so seldom seen on her restless face.

"How good Meg is! Come, Amy, let's do as they do. I'll help you with the hard words, and they'll explain things if we don't understand," whispered Beth, very much impressed by the pretty books and her sisters' example.

"I'm glad mine is blue," said Amy; and then the rooms were very still while the pages were softly turned, and the winter sunshine crept in to touch the bright heads and serious faces with a Christmas greeting.

"Where is mother?" asked Meg, as she and Jo ran down to thank her for their gifts, half an hour later.

"Goodness only knows. Some poor creeter come a-beggin', and your ma went straight off to see what was needed. There never *was* such a woman for givin' away vittles and drink, clothes and firin'," replied Hannah, who had lived with the family since Meg was born, and was considered by them all more as a friend than a servant.

"She will be back soon, I think; so fry your cakes, and have everything ready," said Meg, looking over the presents which were collected in a basket and kept under the sofa, ready to be produced at the proper time. "Why, where is Amy's bottle of cologne?" she added, as the little flask did not appear.

"She took it out a minute ago, and went



off with it to put a ribbon on it, or some such notion," replied Jo, dancing about the room to take the first stiffness off the new army slippers.

"How nice my handkerchiefs look, don't they? Hannah washed and ironed them for me, and I marked them all myself," said Beth, looking proudly at the somewhat uneven letters which had cost her such labor.

"Bless the child! she's gone and put 'Mother' on them instead of 'M. March.' How funny!" cried Jo, taking up one.

"Isn't it right? I thought it was better to do it so, because Meg's initials are 'M.M.,' and I don't want anyone to use these but Marmee," said Beth, looking troubled.

"It's all right, dear, and a very pretty idea—quite sensible, too, for no one can ever mistake now. It will please her very much, I know," said Meg, with a frown for Jo and a smile for Beth.

"There's mother. Hide the basket, quick!" cried Jo, as a door slammed, and steps sounded in the hall.

Amy came in hastily, and looked rather abashed when she saw her sisters all waiting for her.

"Where have you been, and what are you hiding behind you?" asked Meg, surprised to see, by her hood and cloak, that lazy Amy had been out so early.

Don't laugh at me, Jo! I didn't mean anyone should know till the time came. I only meant to change the little bottle for a big one, and I gave *all* my money to get it, and I'm truly trying not to be selfish any more."

As she spoke, Amy showed the handsome flask which replaced the cheap one; and looked so earnest and humble in her little effort to forget herself that Meg hugged her on the

spot, and Jo pronounced her "a trump," while Beth ran to the window, and picked her finest rose to ornament the stately bottle.

"You see I felt ashamed of my present, after reading and talking about being good this morning, so I ran round the corner and changed it the minute I was up: and I'm so glad, for mine is the handsomest now."

Another bang of the street door sent the basket under the sofa, and the girls to the table, eager for breakfast.

"Merry Christmas, Marmee! Many of them! Thank you for our books; we read some, and mean to every day," they cried, in chorus.

"Merry Christmas, little daughters! I'm glad you began at once, and hope you will keep on. But I want to say one word before we sit down. Not far away from here lies a poor woman with a little newborn baby. Six children are huddled into one bed to keep from freezing, for they have no fire. There is nothing to eat over there; and the oldest boy came to tell me they were suffering hunger and cold. My girls, will you give them your breakfast as a Christmas present?"

They were all unusually hungry, having waited nearly an hour, and for a minute no one spoke; only a minute, before Jo exclaimed impetuously, "I'm so glad you came before we began!"

"May I go and help carry the things to the poor little children?" asked Beth eagerly.

"I shall take the cream and the muffins," added Amy, heroically giving up the articles she most liked.

Meg was already covering the buckwheats, and piling the bread into one big plate.

"I thought you'd do it," said Mrs. March, smiling as if satisfied. "You shall all go and help me, and when we come back we will

have bread and milk for breakfast, and make it up at dinnertime."

They were soon ready, and the procession set out. Fortunately it was early, and they went through back streets, so few people saw them, and no one laughed at the queer party.

A poor, bare, miserable room it was, with broken windows, no fire, ragged bedclothes, a sick mother, wailing baby, and a group of pale, hungry children cuddled under one old quilt, trying to keep warm.

How the big eyes stared and the blue lips smiled as the girls went in!

"Ach, mein Gott! it is good angels come to us!" said the poor woman, crying for joy.

"Funny angels in hoods and mittens," said Jo, and set them laughing.

In a few minutes it really did seem as if kind spirits had been at work there. Hannah, who had carried wood, made a fire, and stopped up the broken panes with old hats and her own cloak. Mrs. March gave the mother tea and gruel, and comforted her with promises of help, while she dressed the little baby as tenderly as if it had been her own. The girls, meantime, spread the table, set the children round the fire, and fed them like so many hungry birds—laughing, talking, and trying to understand the funny broken English.

"Das ist gut!" "Die Engel-kinder!" cried the poor things, as they ate, and warmed their purple hands at the comfortable blaze.

The girls had never been called angel children before, and thought it very agreeable, especially Jo, who had been considered a "Sancho" ever since she was born. That was a very happy breakfast, though they didn't get any of it; and when they went away, leaving comfort behind, I think there were

not in all the city four merrier people than the hungry little girls who gave away their breakfasts and contented themselves with bread and milk on Christmas morning.

"That's loving our neighbor better than ourselves, and I like it," said Meg, as they set out their presents, while their mother was upstairs collecting clothes for the poor Hummels.


Not a very splendid show, but there was a great deal of love done up in the few little bundles; and the tall vase of red roses, white chrysanthemums, and trailing vines, which stood in the middle, gave quite an elegant air to the table.

"She's coming! Strike up, Beth! Open the door, Amy! Three cheers for Marmee!" cried Jo, prancing about, while Meg went to conduct mother to the seat of honor.

Beth played her gayest march, Amy threw open the door, and Meg enacted escort with great dignity. Mrs. March was both surprised and touched; and smiled with her eyes full as she examined her presents, and read the little notes which accompanied them. The slippers went on at once, a new handkerchief was slipped into her pocket, well scented with Amy's cologne, the rose was fastened in her bosom, and the nice gloves were pronounced a "perfect fit."

There was a good deal of laughing and kissing and explaining, in the simple, loving fashion which makes these home-festivals so pleasant at the time, so sweet to remember long afterward, and then all fell to work.



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Christmas
Songs & Stories 

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A Perigee Book

CHRISTMAS AT DINGLEY DELL

by CHARLES DICKENS

From the centre of the ceiling of . . . [the] kitchen, old Wardle had . . . suspended, with his own hands, a huge branch of mistletoe, and this same branch of mistletoe instantaneously gave rise to a scene of general and delightful struggling and confusion; in the midst of which, Mr. Pickwick, with a gallantry that would have done honour to a descendant of Lady Tollinglower herself, took the old lady by the hand, led her beneath the mystic branch, and saluted her in all courtesy and decorum. The old lady submitted to this piece of practical politeness with all the dignity which befitted so important and serious a solemnity, but the younger ladies, not being so thoroughly imbued with a superstitious veneration for the custom; or imagining that the value of a salute is very much enhanced if it cost a little trouble to obtain it; screamed and struggled, and ran into corners, and threatened and remonstrated, and did everything but leave the room, until some of the less adventurous gentlemen were on the point of desisting, when they all at once found it useless to resist any longer, and submitted to be kissed with a good grace . . . Wardle stood with his back to the fire, surveying the whole scene, with the utmost satisfaction; and the fat boy took the opportunity of appropriating to his own use, and summarily devouring, a particularly fine mince-pie, that had been carefully put by for somebody else.

Now, the screaming had subsided, and faces were in a glow, and curls in a tangle, and Mr.

Pickwick, after kissing the old lady as before mentioned, was standing under the mistletoe, looking with a very pleased countenance on all that was passing around him, when the young lady with the black eyes, after a little whispering with the other young ladies, made a sudden dart forward, and, putting her arm round Mr. Pickwick's neck, saluted him affectionately on the left cheek; and before Mr. Pickwick distinctly knew what was the matter, he was surrounded by the whole body, and kissed by every one of them.

It was a pleasant thing to see Mr. Pickwick in the centre of the group, now pulled this way and then that, and first kissed on the chin, and then on the nose, and then on the spectacles: and to hear the peals of laughter which were raised on every side; but it was a still more pleasant thing to see Mr. Pickwick, blinded shortly afterwards with a silk handkerchief, falling up against the wall, and scrambling into corners, and going through all the mysteries of blind-man's buff, with the utmost relish for the game, until at last he caught one of the poor relations, and then had to evade the blindman himself, which he did with a nimbleness and agility that elicited the admiration and applause of all beholders. The poor relations caught the people who they thought would like it, and, when the game flagged, got caught themselves. When they were all tired of blind-man's buff, there was a great game at snapdragon, and when fingers enough were burned with that, and all the raisins were gone, they sat down by the huge fire of blaz-



ing logs to a substantial supper, and a mighty bowl of wassail, something smaller than an ordinary wash-house copper, in which the hot apples were hissing and bubbling with a rich look, and a jolly sound, that were perfectly irresistible.

"This," said Mr. Pickwick, looking around him, "this is, indeed, comfort."

"Our invariable custom," replied Mr. Wardle. "Everybody sits down with us on Christmas eve, as you see them now—servants and all; and here we wait, until the clock strikes twelve, to usher Christmas in, and beguile the time with forfeits and old stories. Trundle, my boy, rake up the fire."

Up flew the bright sparks in myriads as the logs were stirred. The deep red blaze sent forth a rich glow, that penetrated into the furthest corner of the room, and cast its cheer-

ful tint on every face . . .

"How it snows!" said one of the men, in a low tone.

"Snow, does it?" said Wardle.

"Rough, cold night, sir," replied the man; "and there's a wind got up, that drifts it across the fields, in a thick white cloud."

"What does Jem say?" inquired the old lady. "There ain't anything the matter, is there?"

"No, no, mother," replied Wardle; "he says there's a snowdrift, and a wind that's piercing cold. I should know that, by the way it rumbles in the chimney."

"Ah!" said the old lady, "there was just such a wind, and just such a fall of snow, a good many years back, I recollect—just five years before your poor father died. It was a Christmas eve, too; and I remember that on

that very night he told us the story about the goblins that carried away old Gabriel Grub."

"The story about what?" said Mr. Pickwick.

"Oh, nothing, nothing," replied Wardle.

"About an old sexton, that the good people down here suppose to have been carried away by goblins."

"Suppose!" ejaculated the old lady. "Is there anybody hardy enough to disbelieve it? Suppose! Haven't you heard ever since you were a child, that he *was* carried away by the goblins, and don't you know he was?"

"Very well, mother, he was, if you like," said Wardle, laughing. "He *was* carried away by goblins, Pickwick; and there's an end of the matter."

"No, no," said Mr. Pickwick, "not an end of it, I assure you; for I must hear how, and why, and all about it."

Wardle smiled, as every head was bent forward to hear; and filling out the wassail with no stinted hand, nodded a health to Mr. Pickwick, and began as follows:

The Story of the Goblins Who Stole a Sexton

"In an old abbey town, down in this part of the country, a long, long while ago—so long, that the story must be a true one, because our great grandfathers implicitly believed it—there officiated as sexton and grave-digger in the churchyard, one Gabriel Grub. It by no means follows that because a man is a sexton, and constantly surrounded by the emblems of mortality, therefore he should be a morose and melancholy man; your undertakers are the merriest fellows in the world; and I once had the honour of being on intimate terms with a mute, who in private life, and off duty, was



as comical and jocose a little fellow as ever chirped out a devil-may-care song, without a hitch in his memory, or drained off the contents of a good stiff glass without stopping for breath. But, notwithstanding these precedents to the contrary, Gabriel Grub was an ill-conditioned, cross-grained, surly fellow—a morose and lonely man, who consorted with nobody but himself, and an old wicker bottle which fitted into his large deep waistcoat pocket—and who eyed each merry face, as it passed him by, with such a deep scowl of malice and ill-humour, as it was difficult to meet, without feeling something the worse for.

"A little before twilight, one Christmas eve, Gabriel shouldered his spade, lighted his lantern, and betook himself towards the old churchyard; for he had got a grave to finish by next morning, and, feeling very low, he thought it might raise his spirits, perhaps, if he went on with his work at once. As he went his way, up the ancient street, he saw the cheerful light of the blazing fire gleam through the old casements, and heard the loud laugh

and the cheerful shouts of those who were assembled around them; he marked the bustling preparations for next day's cheer, and smelt the numerous savoury odours consequent thereupon, as they steamed up from the kitchen windows in clouds. All this was gall and wormwood to the heart of Gabriel Grub; and when groups of children bounded out of the houses, tripped across the road, and were met, before they could knock at the opposite door, by half a dozen curly-headed little rascals who crowded round them as they flocked up-stairs to spend the evening in their Christmas games, Gabriel smiled grimly, and clutched the handle of his spade with a firmer grasp, as he thought of measles, scarlet-fever, thrush, whooping-cough, and a good many other sources of consolation besides.

"In this happy frame of mind, Gabriel strode along: returning a short, sullen growl to the good-humoured greetings of such of his neighbours as now and then passed him: until he turned into the dark lane which led to the churchyard. Now, Gabriel had been looking forward to reaching the dark lane, because it was, generally speaking a nice, gloomy, mournful place, into which the towns-people did not much care to go, except in broad daylight, and when the sun was shining; consequently, he was not a little indignant to hear a young urchin roaring out some jolly song about a merry Christmas, in this very sanctuary, which had been called Coffin Lane ever since the days of the old abbey, and the time of the shaven-headed monks. As Gabriel walked on, and the voice drew nearer, he found it proceeded from a small boy, who was hurrying along, to join one of the little parties in the old street, and who, partly to keep himself for the occasion, was shouting out the

song at the highest pitch of his lungs. So Gabriel waited until the boy came up, and then dodged him into a corner, and rapped him over the head with his lantern five or six times, to teach him to modulate his voice. And as the boy hurried away with his hand to his head, singing quite a different sort of tune, Gabriel Grub chuckled very heartily to himself, and entered the churchyard: locking the gate behind him.

"He took off his coat, put down his lantern, and getting into the unfinished grave, worked at it for an hour or so, with right good will. But the earth was hardened with the frost, and it was no very easy matter to break it up, and shovel it out; and although there was a moon, it was a very young one, and shed little light upon the grave, which was in the shadow of the church. At any other time, these obstacles would have made Gabriel Grub very moody and miserable, but he was so well pleased with having stopped the small boy's singing, that he took little heed of the scanty progress he had made, and looked down into the grave, when he had finished work for the night, with grim satisfaction: murmuring as he gathered up his things:

*Brave lodgings for one, brave lodgings for
one
A few feet of cold earth, when life is done;
A stone at the head, a stone at the feet,
A rich, juicy meal for the worms to eat;
Rank grass overhead, and damp clay around,
Brave lodgings for one, these, in holy ground!*

"Ho! ho

"'Ho! ho!' laughed Gabriel Grub, as he sat himself down on a flat tombstone which

was a favourite resting-place of his; and drew forth his wicker bottle. 'A coffin at Christmas! A Christmas Box. Ho! ho! ho!'

"'Ho! ho! ho!'" repeated a voice which sounded close behind him.

"Gabriel paused in some alarm, in the act of raising the wicker bottle to his lips; and looked round. The bottom of the oldest grave about him, was not more still and quiet, than the churchyard in the pale moonlight. The cold hoarfrost glistened on the tombstones, and sparkled like rows of gems, among the stone carvings of the old church. The snow lay hard and crisp upon the ground; and spread over the thickly strewn mounds of earth so white and smooth a cover that it seemed as if corpses lay there, hidden only by their tranquillity of the solemn scene. Sound itself appeared to be frozen up, all was so cold and still.

"'It was the echoes,'" said Gabriel Grub, raising the bottle to his lips again.

"'It was *not*,'" said a deep voice.

"Gabriel started up, and stood rooted to the spot with astonishment and terror; for his eyes rested on a form that made his blood run cold.

"Seated on an upright tombstone, close to him, was a strange unearthly figure, whom Gabriel felt at once, was no being of this world. His long fantastic legs which might have reached the ground, were cocked up, and crossed after a quaint, fantastic fashion; his sinewy arms were bare; and his hands rested on his knees. On his short round body, he wore a close covering, ornamented with small slashes; a short cloak dangled at his back; the collar was cut into curious peaks, which served the goblin in lieu of ruff or neckerchief; and his shoes curled up at his toes into

long points. On his head, he wore a broad-brimmed sugar-loaf hat, garnished with a single feather. The hat was covered with the white frost; and the goblin looked as if he had sat on the same tombstone very comfortably, for two or three hundred years. He was sitting perfectly still; his tongue was put out, as if in derision; and he was grinning at Gabriel Grub with such a grin as only a goblin could call up.

"'It was *not* the echoes,'" said the goblin.

"Gabriel Grub was paralysed, and could make no reply. 'What do you do here on Christmas eve?' said the goblin sternly.

"'I came to dig a grave, sir,'" stammered Gabriel Grub.

"'What man wanders among graves and churchyards on such a night as this?'" cried the goblin.

"'Gabriel Grub! Gabriel Grub!'" screamed a wild chorus of voices that seemed to fill the churchyard. Gabriel looked fearfully round—nothing was to be seen.

"'What have you got in that bottle?'" said the goblin.

"'Hollands, sir,'" replied the sexton, trembling more than ever; for he had bought it of the smugglers, and he thought that perhaps his questioner might be in the excise department of the goblins.

"'Who drinks Hollands alone, and in a churchyard, on such a night as this?'" said the goblin.

"'Gabriel Grub! Gabriel Grub!'" exclaimed the wild voices again.

"The goblin leered maliciously at the terrified sexton, and then raising his voice, exclaimed:

"'And who, then, is our fair and lawful prize?'"

"To this inquiry the invisible chorus replied, in a strain that sounded like the voices of many choristers singing to the mighty swell of the old church organ—a strain that seemed borne to the sexton's ears upon a wild wind, and to die away as it passed onward; but the burden of the reply was still the same, 'Gabriel Grub! Gabriel Grub!'

"The goblin grinned a broader grin than before, as he said, 'Well, Gabriel, what do you say to this?'

"The sexton gasped for breath.

"'What do you think of this, Gabriel?'" said the goblin, kicking up his feet in the air on either side of the tombstone, and looking at the turned-up points with as much complacency as if he had been contemplating the most fashionable pair of Wellingtons in all Bond Street.

"'It's—it's—very curious, sir,'" replied the sexton, half dead with fright; 'very curious, and very pretty, but I think I'll go back and finish my work, sir, if you please.'

"'Work!'" said the goblin, 'what work?'

"'The grave, sir; making the grave,'" stammered the sexton.

"'Oh, the grave, eh?'" said the goblin; 'who makes graves at a time when all other men are merry, and takes a pleasure in it?'

"Again the mysterious voices replied, 'Gabriel Grub! Gabriel Grub!'

"'I'm afraid my friends want you, Gabriel,'" said the goblin, thrusting his tongue further into his cheek than ever—and a most astonishing tongue it was—'I'm afraid my friends want you, Gabriel,' said the goblin.

"'Under favour, sir,'" replied the horror-stricken sexton, 'I don't think they can, sir; they don't know me, sir; I don't think the gentlemen have ever seen me, sir.'

"'Oh yes, they have,'" replied the goblin; 'we know the man with the sulky face and grim scowl, that came down the street tonight, throwing his evil looks at the children, and grasping his burying spade the tighter. We know the man who struck the boy in the envious malice of his heart, because the boy could be merry, and he could not. We know him, we know him.'

"Here, the goblin gave a loud shrill laugh, which the echoes returned twenty-fold: and throwing his legs up in the air, stood upon his head, or rather upon the very point of his sugar-loaf hat, on the narrow edge of the tombstone: whence he threw a somerset with extraordinary agility, right to the sexton's feet, at which he planted himself in the attitude in which tailors generally sit upon the shopboard.

"'I—I am afraid I must leave you, sir,'" said the sexton, making an effort to move.

"'Leave us!'" said the goblin, 'Gabriel Grub going to leave us. Ho! ho! ho!'

"As the goblin laughed, the sexton observed, for one instant, a brilliant illumination within the windows of the church, as if the whole building were lighted up; it disappeared, the organ pealed forth a lively air, and whole troops of goblins, they very counterpart of the first one, poured into the churchyard, and began playing at leap-frog with the tombstones: never stopping for an instant to take breath, but 'overing' the highest among them, one after the other, with the most marvellous dexterity. The first goblin was a most astonishing leaper, and none of the others could come near him; even in the extremity of his terror the sexton could not help observing, that while his friends were content to leap over the common-sized gravestones, the first

one took the family vaults, iron railings and all, with as much ease as if they had been so many street posts. At last the game reached to a most exciting pitch; the organ played quicker and quicker; and the goblins leaped faster and faster: coiling themselves up, rolling head over heels upon the ground, and bounding over the tombstones like foot-balls. The sexton's brain whirled round with the rapidity of the motion he beheld, and his legs reeled beneath him, as the spirits flew before his eyes: when the goblin king, suddenly darting towards him, laid his hand upon his collar, and sank with him through the earth.

"When Gabriel Grub had had time to fetch his breath, which the rapidity of his descent had for the moment taken away, he found himself in what appeared to be a large cavern, surrounded on all sides by crowds of goblins, ugly and grim; in the centre of the room, on an elevated seat, was stationed his friend of the churchyard; and close beside him stood Gabriel Grub himself, without power of motion.

"'Cold to-night,' said the king of goblins, 'very cold. A glass of something warm, here!'

"At this command, half a dozen officious goblins, with a perpetual smile upon their faces, whom Gabriel Grub imagined to be courtiers, on that account, hastily disappeared, and presently returned with a goblet of liquid fire, which they presented to the king.

"'Ah!' cried the goblin, whose cheeks and throat were transparent, as he tossed down the flame, 'this warms one, indeed! Bring a bumper of the same for Mr. Grub.'

"It was in vain for the unfortunate sexton to protest that he was not in the habit of taking anything warm at night; one of the goblins held him while another poured the

blazing liquid down his throat; the whole assembly screeched with laughter as he coughed and choked, and wiped away the tears which gushed plentifully from his eyes, after swallowing the burning draught.

"'And now,' said the king, fantastically poking the taper corner of his sugar-loaf hat into the sexton's eyes, and thereby occasioning him the most exquisite pain: 'And now, show the man of misery and gloom, a few of the pictures from our own great storehouse!'

"As the goblin said this, a thick cloud which obscured the remoter end of the cavern, rolled gradually away, and disclosed, apparently at a great distance, a small and scantily furnished, but neat and clean apartment. A crowd of little children were gathered round a bright fire, clinging to their mother's gown, and gambolling around her chair. The mother occasionally rose, and drew aside the window-curtain, as if to look for some expected object; a frugal meal was ready spread upon the table, and an elbow chair was placed near the fire. A knock was heard at the door; the mother opened it, and the children crowded round her, and clapped their hands for joy, as their father entered. He was wet and weary, and shook the snow from his garments, as the children crowded round him, and seizing his cloak, hat, stick, and gloves, with busy zeal, ran with them from the room. Then, as he sat down to his meal before the fire, the children climbed about his knee, and the mother sat by his side, and all seemed happiness and comfort.

"But a change came upon the view, almost imperceptibly. The scene was altered to a small bed-room, where the fairest and youngest child lay dying; the roses had fled from his cheek, and the light from the eye; and even

as the sexton looked upon him with an interest he had never felt or known before, he died. His young brothers and sisters crowded round his little bed, and seized his tiny hand, so cold and heavy; but they shrunk back from its touch, and looked with awe on his infant face; for calm and tranquil as it was and sleeping in rest and peace as the beautiful child seemed to be, they saw that he was dead, and they knew that he was an Angel looking down upon, and blessing them, from a bright and happy Heaven.

“Again the light cloud passed across the picture, and again the subject changed. The father and mother were old and helpless now, and the number of those about them was diminished more than half; but content and cheerfulness sat on every face, and beamed in every eye, as they crowded round the fire-side, and told and listened to old stories of earlier and bygone days. Slowly and peacefully, the father sank into the grave, and, soon after, the sharer of all his cares and troubles followed him to a place of rest. The few, who yet survived them, knelt by their tomb, and watered the green turf which covered it, with their tears; then rose, and turned away: sadly and mournfully, but not with bitter cries, or despairing lamentations, for they knew that they should one day meet again; and once more they mixed with the busy world, and their content and cheerfulness were restored. The cloud settled upon the picture, and concealed it from the sexton’s view.

“‘What do you think of *that*?’ said the goblin, turning his large face towards Gabriel Grub.

“Gabriel murmured out something about its being very pretty, and looked somewhat

ashamed, as the goblin bent his fiery eyes upon him.

“‘*You* a miserable man!’ said the goblin, in a tone of excessive contempt. ‘*You!*’ He appeared disposed to add more, but indignation choked his utterance, so he lifted up one of his very pliable legs, and flourishing it above his head a little, to insure his aim, administered a good sound kick to Gabriel Grub; immediately after which, all the goblins in waiting crowded round the wretched sexton, and kicked him without mercy: according to the established and invariable custom of courtiers upon earth, who kick whom royalty kicks, and hug whom royalty hugs.

“‘Show him some more!’ said the king of the goblins.

“At these words, the cloud was dispelled, and a rich and beautiful landscape was disclosed to view—there is just such another, to this day, within half a mile of the old abbey town. The sun shone from out the clear blue sky, the water sparkled beneath its rays, and the trees looked greener, and the flowers more gay, beneath his cheering influence. The water rippled on, with a pleasant sound; the trees rustled in the light wind that murmured among their leaves; the birds sang upon the boughs; and the lark carolled on high her welcome to the morning. Yes, it was morning; the bright, balmy morning of summer; the minutest leaf, the smallest blade of grass, was instinct with life. The ant crept forth to her daily toil, the butterfly fluttered and basked in the warm rays of the sun; myriads of insects spread their transparent wings, and revelled in their brief but happy existence. Man walked forth, elated with the scene; and all was brightness and splendour.

“‘*You* a miserable man!’ said the king of

the goblins, in a more contemptuous tone than before. And again the king of the goblins gave his leg a flourish; again it descended on the shoulders of the sexton; and again the attendant goblins imitated the example of their chief.

“Many a time the cloud went and came, and many a lesson it taught to Gabriel Grub, who, although his shoulders smarted with pain from the frequent applications of the goblins’ feet, looked on with an interest that nothing could diminish. He saw that men who worked hard, and earned their scanty bread with lives of labour, were cheerful and happy; and that to the most ignorant, the sweet face of nature was a never-failing source of cheerfulness and joy. He saw those who had been delicately nurtured, and tenderly brought up, cheerful under privations, and superior to suffering that would have crushed many of a rougher grain, because they bore within their own bosoms the materials of happiness, contentment, and peace. He saw that women, the tenderest and most fragile of all God’s creatures, were the oftenest superior to sorrow, adversity, and distress; and he saw that it was because they bore, in their own hearts, an inexhaustible wellspring of affection and devotion. Above all, he saw that men like himself, who snarled at the mirth and cheerfulness of others, were the foulest weeds on the fair surface of the earth; and setting all the good of the world against the evil, he came to the conclusion that it was a very decent and respectable sort of world after all. No sooner had he formed it, than the cloud which closed over the last picture, seemed to settle on his senses, and lull him to repose. One by one, the goblins faded from his sight; and as the last one disappeared, he

sunk to sleep.

“The day had broken when Gabriel Grub awoke, and found himself lying, at full length on the flat gravestone in the churchyard, with the wicker bottle lying empty by his side, and his coat, spade, and lantern, all well whitened by the last night’s frost, scattered on the ground. The stone on which he had first seen the goblin seated stood bolt upright before him, and the grave at which he had worked, the night before, was not far off. At first, he began to doubt the reality of his adventures, but the acute pain in his shoulders when he attempted to rise assured him that the kicking of the goblins was certainly not ideal. He was staggered again by observing no traces of footsteps in the snow on which the goblins had played at leap-frog with the gravestones, but he speedily accounted for this circumstance when he remembered that, being spirits, they would leave no visible impression behind them. So, Gabriel Grub got on his feet as well as he could, for the pain in his back; and brushing the frost off his coat, put it on, and turned his face towards the town.

“But he was an altered man, and he could not bear the thought of returning to a place where his repentance would be scoffed at, and his reformation disbelieved. He hesitated for a few moments; and then turned away to wander where he might, and seek his bread elsewhere.

“The lantern, the spade, and the wicker bottle, were found, that day, in the churchyard. There were a great many speculations about the sexton’s fate, at first, but it was speedily determined that he had been carried away by the goblins; and there were not wanting some very credible witnesses who had distinctly

seen him whisked through the air on the back of a chestnut horse blind of one eye, with the hind-quarters of a lion, and the tail of a bear. At length all this was devoutly believed; and the new sexton used to exhibit to the curious, for a trifling emolument, a good-sized piece of the church weathercock which had been accidentally kicked off by the aforesaid horse in his aerial flight, and picked up by himself in the churchyard, a year or two afterwards.

“Unfortunately, these stories were somewhat disturbed by the unlooked-for re-appearance of Gabriel Grub himself, some ten years afterwards, a ragged, contented, rheumatic old man. He told his story to the clergyman, and also to the mayor; and in course of time it began to be received, as a matter of history, in which form it has continued down to this very day. The believers in the weathercock tale, having misplaced their confidence once, were not easily prevailed upon to part with it again, so they looked as wise as they could, shrugged their shoulders, touched their foreheads, and murmured something about Gabriel Grub having drunk all the Hollands, and then fallen asleep on the flat tombstone; and they affected to explain what he supposed he had witnessed in the goblin’s cavern, by saying that he had seen the world, and grown wiser. But this opinion, which was by no means a popular one at any time, gradually died off; and be the matter how it may, as Gabriel Grub was afflicted with rheumatism to the end of his days, this story has at least one moral, if it teach no better one—and that is, that if a man turn sulky and drinky by himself at Christmas time, he may make up his mind to be not a bit the better for it: let the spirits be never so good, or let them be even as many degrees beyond proof, as those which Gabriel

Grub saw in the goblin’s cavern.”

“Well, Sam,” said Mr. Pickwick as that favoured servitor entered his bed-chamber with his warm water, on the morning of Christmas day, “still frosty?”

“Water in the wash-hand basin’s a mask o’ ice, sir,” responded Sam.

“Severe weather, Sam,” observed Mr. Pickwick.

“Fine time for them as is well wropped up, as the Polar Bear said to himself, ven he was practising his skating,” replied Mr. Weller.

“I shall be down in a quarter of an hour, Sam,” said Mr. Pickwick, untying his nightcap.

“Wery good, sir,” replied Sam . . .

“Now,” said Wardle, after a substantial lunch, with the agreeable items of strong beer and cherry-brandy, had been done ample justice to; “what say you to an hour on the ice? We shall have plenty of time.”

“Capital!” said Mr. Benjamin Allen.

“Prime!” ejaculated Mr. Bob Sawyer.

“You skate, of course, Winkle?” said Wardle.

“Ye-es; oh, yes,” replied Mr. Winkle. “I—I—am *rather* out of practice.”

“Oh, *do* skate, Mr. Winkle,” said Arabella. “I like to see it so much.”

“Oh, it is *so* graceful,” said another young lady.

A third young lady said it was elegant, and a fourth expressed her opinion that it was “swan-like.”

“I should be very happy, I’m sure,” said Mr. Winkle, reddening; “but I have no skates.”

This objection was at once overruled. Trundle had a couple of pair, and the fat boy announced that there were half-a-dozen more down-stairs; whereat Mr. Winkle expressed ex-

quisite delight, and looked exquisitely uncomfortable.

Old Wardle led the way to a pretty large sheet of ice; and the fat boy and Mr. Weller, having shovelled and swept away the snow which had fallen on it during the night, Mr. Bob Sawyer adjusted his skates with a dexterity which to Mr. Winkle was perfectly marvellous and described circles with his left leg, and cut figures of eight, and inscribed upon the ice, without once stopping for breath, a great many other pleasant and astonishing devices, to the excessive satisfaction of Mr. Pickwick, Mr. Tupman, and the ladies: which reached a pitch of positive enthusiasm, when old Wardle and Benjamin Allen, assisted by the aforesaid Bob Sawyer, performed some mystic evolutions, which they called a reel.

All this time, Mr. Winkle, with his face and hands blue with the cold, had been forcing a gimlet into the soles of his feet, and putting his skates on, with the points behind, and getting the straps into a very complicated and entangled state, with the assistance of Mr. Weller, the unfortunate skates were firmly screwed and buckled on, and Mr. Winkle was raised to his feet.

"Now, then, sir," said Sam, in an encouraging tone; "off with you, and show 'em how to do it."

"Stop, Sam, stop!" said Mr. Winkle, trembling violently, and clutching hold of Sam's arms with the grasp of a drowning man. "How slippery it is, Sam!"

"Not an uncommon thing upon ice, sir," replied Mr. Weller. "Hold up, sir!"

This last observation of Mr. Weller's bore reference to a demonstration Mr. Winkle made at the instant, of a frantic desire to throw his feet in the air, and dash the back of his head

on the ice.

"These—these—are very awkward skates; ain't they, Sam?" inquired Mr. Winkle, staggering.

"I'm afeerd there's a orkard gen'l'm'n in 'em, sir," replied Sam.

"Now, Winkle," cried Mr. Pickwick, quite unconscious that there was anything the matter. "Come; the ladies are all anxiety."

"Yes, yes," replied Mr. Winkle, with a ghastly smile. "I'm coming."

"Just a goin' to begin," said Sam, endeavouring to disengage himself. "Now, sir, start off!"

"Stop an instant, Sam," gasped Mr. Winkle, clinging most affectionately to Mr. Weller. "I find I've got a couple of coats at home that I don't want, Sam. You may have them, Sam."

"Thank'ee, sir," replied Mr. Weller.

"Never mind touching your hat, Sam," said Mr. Winkle, hastily. "You needn't take your hand away to do that. I meant to have given you five shillings this morning for a Christmas-box, Sam. I'll give it you this afternoon, Sam."

"You're verry good, sir," replied Mr. Weller.

"Just hold me at first, Sam; will you?" said Mr. Winkle. "There—that's right. I shall soon get in the way of it, Sam. Not too fast, Sam; not too fast."

Mr. Winkle stooping forward, with his body half doubled up, was being assisted over the ice by Mr. Weller, in a very singular and unswan-like manner, when Mr. Pickwick most innocently shouted from the opposite bank:

"Sam!"

"Sir?"

"Here. I want you."

"Let go, sir," said Sam. "Don't you hear the governor a callin'? Let go, sir."



With a violent effort, Mr. Weller disengaged himself from the grasp of the agonised Pickwickian, and, in so doing, administered a considerable impetus to the unhappy Mr. Winkle. With an accuracy which no degree of dexterity or practice could have insured, that unfortunate gentleman bore swiftly down into the centre of the reel, at the very moment when Mr. Bob Sawyer was performing a flourish of unparalleled beauty. Mr. Winkle struck wildly against him, and with a loud crash they both fell heavily down. Mr. Pickwick ran to the spot. Bob Sawyer had risen to his feet, but Mr. Winkle was far too wise to do anything of the kind, in skates. He was seated on the ice, making spasmodic efforts to smile; but anguish was depicted on every lineament of his countenance. . . .

"Lift him up," said Mr. Pickwick. Sam assisted him to rise. Mr. Pickwick retired a few paces apart from the bystanders; and, beckoning his friend to approach, fixed a searching look upon him, and uttered in a low, but distinct and emphatic tone, these remarkable words: "You're a humbug, sir."

"A what?" said Mr. Winkle, starting.

"A humbug, sir. I will speak plainer, if you wish it. An imposter, sir."

With those words, Mr. Pickwick turned slowly on his heel, and rejoined his friends.

While Mr. Pickwick was delivering himself of the sentiment just recorded, Mr. Weller and the fat boy, having by their joint endeavours cut out a slide, were exercising themselves thereupon, in a very masterly and brilliant manner. Sam Weller, in particular, was displaying that beautiful feat of fancy-sliding which is currently denominated "knocking at the cobbler's door," and which is achieved by skimming over the ice on one foot, and occasionally giving a postman's knock upon it with the other. It was a good long slide, and there was something in the motion which Mr. Pickwick, who was very cold with standing still, could not help envying.

"It looks a nice warm exercise that, doesn't it?" he inquired of Wardle, when that gentleman was thoroughly out of breath, by reason of the indefatigable manner in which he had converted his legs into a pair of compasses, and drawn complicated problems on the ice.

"Ah, it does indeed," replied Wardle. "Do you slide?"

"I used to do so, on the gutters, when I was a boy," replied Mr. Pickwick.

"Try it now," said Wardle.

"Oh, do, please, Mr. Pickwick!" cried all the ladies.

"I should be very happy to afford you any



amusement," replied Mr. Pickwick, "but I haven't done such a thing these thirty years."

"Pooh! Pooh! Nonsense!" said Wardle, dragging off his skates with the impetuosity which characterised all his proceedings. "Here; I'll keep you company; come along!" And away went the good-tempered old fellow down the slide, with a rapidity which came very close upon Mr. Weller, and beat the fat boy all to nothing.

Mr. Pickwick paused, considered, pulled off his gloves and put them in his hat: took two or three short runs, baulked himself as often, and at last took another run, and went slowly and gravely down the slide, with his feet about a yard and a quarter apart, amidst the gratified shouts of all the spectators.

"Keep the pot a bilin', sir!" said Sam; and down went Wardle again, and then Mr. Pickwick, and then Sam, and then Mr. Winkle, and then Mr. Bob Sawyer, and then the fat boy, and then Mr. Snodgrass, following closely upon each other's heels, and running after each other with as much eagerness as if all their future prospects in life depended on their expedition.

It was the most intensely interesting thing, to observe the manner in which Mr. Pickwick performed his share in the ceremony; to watch the torture of anxiety with which he viewed the person behind, gaining upon him at the imminent hazard of tripping him up; to see him gradually expend the painful force he had put on at first, and turn slowly round on the slide, with his face towards the point from which he had started; to contemplate the playful smile which mantled on his face when he had accomplished the distance, and the eagerness with which he turned round when he had done so, and ran

after his predecessor: his black gaiters tripping pleasantly through the snow, and his eyes beaming cheerfulness and gladness through his spectacles. And when he was knocked down (which happened upon the average every third round), it was the most invigorating sight that can possibly be imagined, to behold him gather up his hat, gloves, and handkerchief, with a glowing countenance, and resume his station in the rank, with an ardour and enthusiasm that nothing could abate.

The sport was at its height, the sliding was at the quickest, the laughter was at the loudest, when a sharp smart crack was heard. There was a quick rush towards the bank, a wild scream from the ladies, and a shout from Mr. Tupman. A large mass of ice disappeared; the water bubbled up over it; Mr. Pickwick's hat, gloves, and handkerchief were floating on the surface; and this was all of Mr. Pickwick that anybody could see.

Dismay and anguish were depicted on every countenance, the males turned pale, and the females fainted. Mr. Snodgrass and Mr. Winkle grasped each other by the hand and gazed at the spot where their leader had gone down, with frenzied eagerness: while Mr. Tupman, by way of rendering the promptest assistance, and at the same time conveying to any persons who might be within hearing, the clearest possible notion of the catastrophe, ran off across the country at his utmost speed screaming "Fire!" with all his might.

It was at this moment, when old Wardle and Sam Weller were approaching the hole with cautious steps, and Mr. Benjamin Allen was holding a hurried consultation with Mr. Bob Sawyer, on the advisability of bleeding

the company generally, as an improving little bit of professional practice—it was at this very moment, that a face, head, and shoulders, emerged from beneath the water, and disclosed the features and spectacles of Mr. Pickwick.

“Keep yourself up for an instant—for only one instant!” bawled Mr. Snodgrass.

“Yes, do; let me implore you—for my sake!” roared Mr. Winkle, deeply affected. The adjuration was rather unnecessary; the probability being, that if Mr. Pickwick had declined to keep himself up for anybody’s else’s sake, it would have occurred to him that he might as well do so, for his own.

“Do you feel the bottom there, old fellow?” said Wardle.

“Yes, certainly,” replied Mr. Pickwick, wringing the water from his head and face, and gasping for breath. “I fell upon my back. I couldn’t get on my feet at first.”

The clay upon so much of Mr. Pickwick’s coat as was yet visible, bore testimony to the accuracy of this statement; and as the fears of the spectators were still further relieved by the fat boy’s suddenly recollecting that the water was nowhere more than five feet deep, prodigies of valour were performed to get him out. After a vast quantity of splashing, and cracking, and struggling, Mr. Pickwick was at length fairly extricated from his unpleasant position, and once more stood on dry land.

“Oh, he’ll catch his death of cold,” said Emily.

“Dear old thing!” said Arabella. “Let me wrap this shawl round you, Mr. Pickwick.”

“Ah, that’s the best thing you can do,” said Wardle, “and when you’ve got it on, run home as fast as your legs can carry you, and jump into bed directly.”

A dozen shawls were offered on the instant. Three or four of the thickest having been selected, Mr. Pickwick was wrapped up, and started off, under the guidance of Mr. Weller: presenting the singular phenomenon of an elderly gentleman, dripping wet, and without a hat, with his arms bound down to his sides, skimming over the ground, without any clearly defined purpose, at the rate of six good English miles an hour.

But Mr. Pickwick cared not for appearances in such an extreme case, and urged on by Sam Weller, he kept at the very top of his speed until he reached the door of Manor Farm, where Mr. Tupman had arrived some five minutes before, and had frightened the old lady into palpitations of the heart by impressing her with the unalterable conviction that the kitchen chimney was on fire—a calamity which always presented itself in glowing colours to the old lady’s mind, when anybody about her evinced the smallest agitation.

Mr. Pickwick paused not an instant until he was snug in bed. Sam Weller lighted a blazing fire in the room, and took up his dinner; a bowl of punch was carried up afterwards, and a grand carouse held in honour of his safety. Old Wardle would not hear of his rising, so they made the bed the chair, and Mr. Pickwick presided. A second and a third bowl were ordered in; and when Mr. Pickwick awoke the next morning, there was not a symptom of rheumatism about him: which proves, as Mr. Bob Sawyer very justly observed, that there is nothing like hot punch in such cases: and that if ever hot punch did fail to act as a preventive, it was merely because the patient fell into the vulgar error of not taking enough of it.



BOOKS BY EARL HAMNER, JR.

Fifty Roads to Town
Spencer's Mountain
You Can't Get There From Here
The Homecoming

EARL HAMNER, JR.



THE
HOMECOMING

A Novel
About Spencer's Mountain



RANDOM HOUSE

New York



THREE

Two applesauce cakes were on display in the middle of the kitchen table when Clay-Boy walked in. He breathed in the spicy aroma appreciatively. Something had happened during his absence. There was some quickening of excitement, a sense of Christmas rushing inexorably down upon them, but in spite of the two proud cakes, he knew that his mother was not really prepared for the day.

"I was gotten ready to send out a search party for you," said Olivia. She stood by the old wood-burning cook stove, where she was frying slices of ham.

"I just poked along," lied Clay-Boy. Olivia was inclined to be overly protective, and he had learned not to reveal his more dangerous adventures on the mountain for fear she might not allow him to venture there alone.

"Did you get the tree?" she asked.

"Yes ma'am," he answered. "It's out on the porch. Where is everybody?" asked Clay-Boy, sensing an unnatural quiet in the house.

"I sent the children over to ask Mama and Papa to come have supper with us."

Clay-Boy noticed that the ham had been pared down to the bone and that every edible slice had been removed. He knew that it was the last ham left from the hog his father had butchered and cured in the fall.

"Mama, what are we goen to have for the Christmas dinner?"

"I don't know, boy," answered Olivia. "Maybe I'll wring Gretchen's neck and make stew and dump-lins."

"Gretchen's a layen hen," objected Clay-Boy. "What'll we do for eggs if we make a stew out of her?"

"I don't know that either," replied Olivia. "I'm feelen reckless. Liven each day as it comes. Let tomorrow take care of itself."

Olivia tried to make her voice sound convincingly free of care, but she didn't succeed. She and Clay-Boy both knew that the money Clay had left with her last week for food had dwindled to less than three dollars. There were some sweet potatoes left in the storage bin in the basement, some dried apples, and a few Mason jars of canned tomatoes, peas, string beans and peach preserves left from her summer's canning. Seeing

Clay-Boy's troubled look, Olivia said reassuringly, "We'll get by."

"What about Santa Claus for the kids?" he asked.

"I made some little things," answered Olivia. "Dresses for each of the girls. Warm pajamas for you boys."

"They'll know you made them," observed Clay-Boy. "They'll know they're not from Santa Claus. They'll stop believen."

"Maybe it's time they did," said Olivia soberly. "In hard times like these maybe it's silly to let children go on believen in foolishness."

"I remember when I was little," said Clay-Boy. "Remember how we used to put out corn flakes for Santa Claus and carrots for his reindeer? It used to take me hours to get to sleep, thinken of him right here in the house. And then in the mornen when the presents were all under the tree and the corn flakes and carrots all gone, I *really* believed, Mama. I believed."

"Times were different. We had money to spend in them days."

"You reckon the Depression will last forever, Mama?"

"I don't know, boy," answered Olivia wearily. "Mr. Roosevelt says it won't. Now stop worryen about things you can't help. Go put up the Christmas Tree. At least we'll have somethen pretty to look at."

Clay-Boy went to the barn, found his father's hand-saw and a square block of wood to use as the base for the Christmas Tree. He returned to the back porch where the tree leaned against the wall. There he shook the tree vigorously, freeing it of the powdery snow which still clung to its limbs so it would be dry enough to take into the house. He sawed the pungent trunk of the evergreen evenly, and nailed the square block to the foot of the trunk.

The boy worked rapidly to set up the tree in the living room before his brothers and sisters arrived home. They would clamor to start decorating it immediately, and he wanted it ready for them.

Once it stood in a corner the tree released its wintery green aroma, which quickly permeated the living room. A tree in the house brought with it a feeling of mystery. Into the house the tree brought with it the memory of thousands of white-hot summer suns, the long wilderness silence of snow-mantled winters, the crash of thunderous storms, the softness of a new green spring, and all the wild things which had rested in its shade or nestled in its branches. There was something pagan and alien in its presence which pervaded the house.

"You sure that's the same tree we picked out last summer?" asked Olivia when she came in to inspect it.

"No, it's not, Mama," replied Clay-Boy. "Some-then broke some branches on that other one."

Just then there was a great stomping of feet on the back porch, and they knew that the children had arrived home. Olivia rushed to the kitchen door, hoping they might have encountered Clay somewhere along the way, that he would be standing there when she opened the door with Pattie-Cake piggyback on his shoulders and the other children holding his hands and coattails. But there were only the children and their grandparents.

"Merry Christmas, daughter," boomed Homer Italiano in his voice, which was so loud that it lent authority to anything he said, no matter how commonplace it might be.

"Come on in, Papa," cried Olivia. "How are you, Mama?"

"I think I got a crick in my back," replied Ida. Homer's wife was a thin wraith of a woman who, unlike her husband, spoke in a thin near-whisper.

Alone with his wife, Homer was tender and dependent, an indulged child as much as a husband, but when they were in the presence of others he found it necessary to deride Ida's talents and personality.

"That woman is crazy," remarked Homer with a wondering shake of his head.

"Don't listen to him," whispered Ida, unbuttoning her coat.

"What's Mama done now," laughed Olivia, ushering the children out of the cold and into the kitchen.

"Been streaken all over the hills taken orders for the Larkin Company. Old woman like her ought to be home sitten by the fire in a rocken chair 'stead of scooten 'round like a snow plow!"

"I made three dollars," protested Ida. "And that's three dollars we wouldn't have if I hadn't been out taken orders."

It was then that the children spotted the Christmas Tree, and with shrieks of delight they streamed into the living room to admire it. The grandparents came to the door and observed the tree for a moment, then turned back to take seats around the kitchen table.

"Where's Clay, daughter?" asked Homer.

"Somewhere between here and Waynesboro," answered Olivia. "Be here soon, I reckon."

"I wouldn't count on it," observed Ida. "I'll bet you he's down yonder drinken whiskey with those Staples women right this second." Ida was a pillar of the Baptist Church and she lost no opportunity to remind her daughter that she had married a heathen.

"Mama, I won't have you talken about Clay that way," objected Olivia.

"He drinks, don't he?" snapped Ida.

"He *takes* a drink," said Olivia. "There's a difference. And anyway it's Christmas Eve. Clay'll want to be with his family."

"At least he's worken," said Homer. "That's more'n can be said for the rest of us."

Nobody had any reply for this.

"Hard times," said Homer philosophically. Ida nodded absently.

"I was listenen to the radio while ago," continued Homer. "They're doen right smart talken about this New Deal."

"It's what the country needs all right," said Olivia.

"I hear 'em talken about it all the time, but I don't know what it means," said Ida.

"It means we got a man in the White House that's goen to do somethen," announced Homer. "Roosevelt says he's goen to open the banks, get the country moven again, and I believe he'll do it. You heard any of them Fireside Chats of his, daughter?"

"I heard one the other night," replied Olivia. "Talken about the NRA or some such thing."

"There's some that feels the country is goen to the dogs," said Homer. "But I don't pay 'em no heed. I say Roosevelt is goen to keep his word."

"They say *she's* real nice," observed Ida. "Joe Phillips was up there in Washington on the Veterans March. She came out there and shook hands with everybody, tasted the stew and all. Joe said he got up as close to her as I am to you."

"I don't care what they do as long as they get the mill open and Clay can come home to work again," said Olivia.

"Clay ought to be shown up here pretty soon," said Homer.

"I expect him any minute," said Olivia, and she gave her mother a confident look to show that she meant what she said.

In the living room there was a crisis. Clay-Boy had been overseeing the decoration of the Christmas Tree. On the topmost point of the tree he had fixed the silver glass star which had belonged to Grandma Spencer. Then they had placed the store-bought ornaments and ropes of tinsel on the tree, but there were still bare spots. To fill them each of the children had brought down from their rooms decorations they had made themselves.

John had varnished some pine cones with gold paint. Mark had found a heavy antique brass key and had polished it so that it shone with a burnished glow. Shirley had joined circles of construction paper together to form a chain. From a piece of red flannel, Matt had constructed a Santa Claus with black-eyed peas for eyes, a lump of coal for a nose and a long ragged cotton beard. Even though she had made it for Thanksgiving, Pattie-Cake, because she was the baby, had been allowed to hang a crayon-colored, cutout of a turkey. From tinfoil Luke had fashioned several silver bells and when the decorations were all in place the tree had developed a certain helter-skelter style.

The trouble developed when Becky arrived with her decoration—a blue jay's nest containing one speckled grayish-blue egg.

"You can't put that thing on the tree," said Matt. "It's full of mites and that old rotten egg will smell bad."

"You don't know what you're talken about," objected Becky. "This egg is *not* rotten. I blew all the stuff out of it. Inside it's clean as a whistle."

"I don't care," said Matt. "It's still got bird poop on it. Who wants a nasty thing like that on a Christmas Tree?"

"I do," said Becky firmly. "And it's not nasty."

"You're such a crazy, Becky," said Shirley.

"Oh, go paddle your canoe," said Becky airily.

Pretending to ignore her brothers and sisters, Becky reached into the most conspicuous spot on the tree and began arranging the blue jay's nest on a handy fork while she sang the first stanza of "The Little Old Cathedral in the Pines."

"All I've got to say," said Clay-Boy, "is Santa Claus is goen to take one smell of that bird poop and he's goen to head right back up the chimney."

Pattie-Cake began to cry.

"What's the matter with you, cry-baby?" demanded Becky.

"Santa Claus won't come because of you," wept Pattie-Cake.

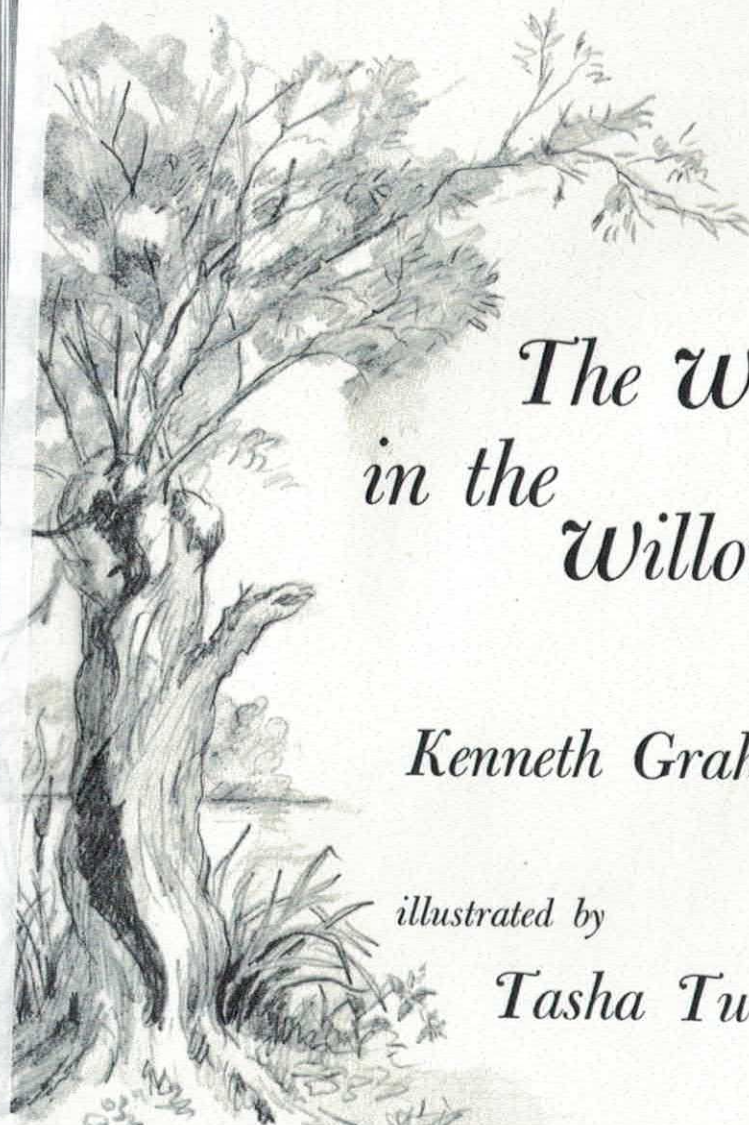


5

Dulce Domum

THE sheep ran huddling together against the hurdles, blowing out thin nostrils and stamping with delicate forefeet, their heads thrown back and a light steam rising from the crowded sheep pen into the frosty air, as the two animals hastened by in high spirits, with much chatter and laughter. They were returning across country after a long day's outing with Otter, hunting and exploring on the wide uplands where certain streams tributary to their own river had their first small beginnings; and the shades of the short winter day were closing in on them, and they had still some distance to go. Plodding at random across the plough, they had heard the sheep and had made for them; and now, leading from the sheep pen, they found a beaten track that made walking a lighter business, and responded, moreover, to that small inquiring something which all animals carry inside them, saying unmistakably, "Yes, quite right; *this leads home!*"

91



The Wind in the Willows

Kenneth Grahame

illustrated by

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THE WORLD PUBLISHING COMPANY
CLEVELAND AND NEW YORK

"It looks as if we were coming to a village," said the Mole somewhat dubiously, slackening his pace, as the track, that had in time become a path and then had developed into a lane, now handed them over to the charge of a well-metalled road. The animals did not hold with villages, and their own highways, thickly frequented as they were, took an independent course, regardless of church, post office, or public-house.

"Oh, never mind," said the Rat. "At this season of the year they're all safe indoors by this time, sitting round the fire; men, women, and children, dogs and cats and all. We shall slip through all right, without any bother or unpleasantness, and we can have a look at them through their windows if you like, and see what they're doing."

The rapid nightfall of mid-December had quite beset the little village as they approached it on soft feet over a thin fall of powdery snow. Little was visible but squares of a dusky orange-red on either side of the street, where the firelight or lamplight of each cottage overflowed through the casements into the dark world without. Most of the low latticed windows were innocent of blinds, and to the lookers-in from outside, the inmates, gathered round the tea table, absorbed in handiwork, or talking with laughter and gesture, had each that happy grace which is the last thing the skilled actor shall capture—the natural grace which goes with perfect unconsciousness of observation. Moving at will from one theatre to another, the two spectators, so far from home themselves, had something of wistfulness in their eyes as they watched a cat being stroked, a sleepy child picked up and huddled off to bed, or a tired man stretch and knock out his pipe on the end of a smouldering log.

But it was from one little window, with its blind drawn



down, a mere blank transparency on the night, that the sense of home and the little curtained world within walls—the larger stressful world of outside Nature shut out and forgotten—most pulsated. Close against the white blind hung a birdcage, clearly silhouetted, every wire, perch, and appurtenance distinct and recognisable, even to yesterday's dull-edged lump of sugar. On the middle perch the fluffy occupant, head tucked well into feathers, seemed so near to them as to be easily stroked, had they tried; even the delicate tips of his plumped-out plumage pencilled plainly on the illuminated screen. As they looked, the sleepy little fellow stirred uneasily, woke, shook himself, and raised his head. They could see the gape of his tiny beak as he

yawned in a bored sort of way, looked round, and then settled his head into his back again, while the ruffled feathers gradually subsided into perfect stillness. Then a gust of bitter wind took them in the back of the neck, a small sting of frozen sleet on the skin woke them as from a dream, and they knew their toes to be cold and their legs tired, and their own home distant a weary way.

Once beyond the village, where the cottages ceased abruptly, on either side of the road they could smell through the darkness the friendly fields again; and they braced themselves for the last long stretch, the home stretch, the stretch that we know is bound to end, some time, in the rattle of the door latch, the sudden firelight, and the sight of familiar things greeting us as long-absent travellers from far overseas. They plodded along steadily and silently, each of them thinking his own thoughts. The Mole's ran a good deal on supper, as it was pitch-dark, and it was all a strange country to him as far as he knew, and he was following obediently in the wake of the Rat, leaving the guidance entirely to him. As for the Rat, he was walking a little way ahead, as his habit was, his shoulders humped, his eyes fixed on the straight grey road in front of him; so he did not notice poor Mole when suddenly the summons reached him, and took him like an electric shock.

We others, who have long lost the more subtle of the physical senses, have not even proper terms to express an animal's intercommunications with his surroundings, living or otherwise, and have only the word "smell," for instance, to include the whole range of delicate thrills which murmur in the nose of the animal night and day, summoning, warning, inciting, repelling. It was one of these mysterious fairy calls from out the void that suddenly reached Mole in the darkness, making him tingle through and through

with its very familiar appeal, even while as yet he could not clearly remember what it was. He stopped dead in his tracks, his nose searching hither and thither in its efforts to recapture the fine filament, the telegraphic current, that had so strongly moved him. A moment, and he had caught it again; and with it this time came recollection in fullest flood.

Home! That was what they meant, those caressing appeals, those soft touches wafted through the air, those invisible little hands pulling and tugging, all one way! Why, it must be quite close by him at that moment, his old home that he had hurriedly forsaken and never sought again, that day when he first found the river! And now it was sending out its scouts and its messengers to capture him and bring him in. Since his escape on that bright morning he had hardly given it a thought, so absorbed had he been in his new life, in all its pleasures, its surprises, its fresh and captivating experiences. Now, with a rush of old memories, how clearly it stood up before him, in the darkness! Shabby indeed, and small and poorly furnished, and yet his, the home he had made for himself, the home he had been so happy to get back to after his day's work. And the home had been happy with him, too, evidently, and was missing him, and wanted him back, and was telling him so, through his nose, sorrowfully, reproachfully, but with no bitterness or anger; only with plaintive reminder that it was there, and wanted him.

The call was clear, the summons was plain. He must obey it instantly, and go. "Ratty!" he called, full of joyful excitement, "hold on! Come back! I want you, quick!"

"O, come along, Mole, do!" replied the Rat cheerfully, still plodding along.

"Please stop, Ratty!" pleaded the poor Mole, in anguish



of heart. "You don't understand! It's my home, my old home! I've just come across the smell of it, and it's close by here, really quite close. And I *must* go to it, I must, I must! O, come back, Ratty! Please, please come back!"

The Rat was by this time very far ahead, too far to hear clearly what the Mole was calling, too far to catch the sharp note of painful appeal in his voice. And he was much taken up with the weather, for he too could smell something—something suspiciously like approaching snow.

"Mole, we mustn't stop now, really!" he called back. "We'll come for it tomorrow, whatever it is you've found. But I daren't stop now—it's late, and the snow's coming on again, and I'm not sure of the way! And I want your nose, Mole, so come on quick, there's a good fellow!" And the Rat pressed forward on his way without waiting for an answer.

Poor Mole stood alone in the road, his heart torn asunder, and a big sob gathering, gathering, somewhere low down inside him, to leap up to the surface presently, he knew, in passionate escape. But even under such a test as this his loyalty to his friend stood firm. Never for a moment did he dream of abandoning him. Meanwhile, the



"What is it, old fellow?"

wafts from his old home pleaded, whispered, conjured, and finally claimed him imperiously. He dared not tarry longer within their magic circle. With a wrench that tore his very heartstrings he set his face down the road and followed submissively in the track of the Rat, while faint, thin little smells, still dogging his retreating nose, reproached him for his new friendship and his callous forgetfulness.

With an effort he caught up to the unsuspecting Rat, who began chattering cheerfully about what they would do when they got back, and how jolly a fire of logs in the parlour would be, and what a supper he meant to eat; never noticing his companion's silence and distressful state of mind. At last, however, when they had gone some considerable way further, and were passing some tree stumps at the edge of a copse that bordered the road, he stopped and said kindly, "Look here, Mole, old chap, you seem dead tired. No talk left in you, and your feet dragging like lead. We'll sit down here for a minute and rest. The snow has held off so far, and the best part of our journey is over."

The Mole subsided forlornly on a tree stump and tried to control himself, for he felt it surely coming. The sob he had fought with so long refused to be beaten. Up and up, it forced its way to the air, and then another, and another, and others thick and fast; till poor Mole at last gave up the struggle, and cried freely and helplessly and openly, now that he knew it was all over and he had lost what he could hardly be said to have found.

The Rat, astonished and dismayed at the violence of Mole's paroxysm of grief, did not dare to speak for a while. At last he said, very quietly and sympathetically, "What is it, old fellow? Whatever can be the matter? Tell us your trouble, and let me see what I can do."

Poor Mole found it difficult to get any words out be-

tween the upheavals of his chest that followed one upon another so quickly and held back speech and choked it as it came. "I know it's a—shabby, dingy little place," he sobbed forth at last, brokenly: "not like—your cosy quarters—or Toad's beautiful hall—or Badger's great house—but it was my own little home—and I was fond of it—and I went away and forgot all about it—and then I smelled it suddenly—on the road, when I called and you wouldn't listen, Rat—and everything came back to me with a rush—and I *wanted* it!—O dear, O dear!—and when you *wouldn't* turn back, Ratty—and I had to leave it, though I was smelling it all the time—I thought my heart would break.—We might have just gone and had one look at it, Ratty—only one look—it was close by—but you wouldn't turn back, Ratty, you wouldn't turn back! O dear, O dear!"

Recollection brought fresh waves of sorrow, and sobs again took full charge of him, preventing further speech.

The Rat stared straight in front of him, saying nothing, only patting Mole gently on the shoulder. After a time he muttered gloomily, "I see it all now! What a *pig* I have been! A pig—that's me! Just a pig—a plain pig!"

He waited till Mole's sobs became gradually less stormy and more rhythmical; he waited till at last sniffs were frequent and sobs only intermittent. Then he rose from his seat, and, remarking carelessly, "Well, now we'd really better be getting on, old chap!" set off up the road again, over the toilsome way they had come.

"Wherever are you [hic] going to [hic], Ratty?" cried the tearful Mole, looking up in alarm.

"We're going to find that home of yours, old fellow," replied the Rat pleasantly; "so you had better come along, for it will take some finding, and we shall want your nose."

"O, come back, Ratty, do!" cried the Mole, getting up

and hurrying after him. "It's no good, I tell you! It's too late, and too dark, and the place is too far off, and the snow's coming! And—and I never meant to let you know I was feeling that way about it—it was all an accident and a mistake! And think of River Bank, and your supper!"

"Hang River Bank, and supper too!" said the Rat heartily. "I tell you, I'm going to find this place now, if I stay out all night. So cheer up, old chap, and take my arm, and we'll very soon be back there again."

Still snuffling, pleading, and reluctant, Mole suffered himself to be dragged back along the road by his imperious companion, who by a flow of cheerful talk and anecdote endeavoured to beguile his spirits back and make the weary way seem shorter. When at last it seemed to the Rat that they must be nearing that part of the road where the Mole had been "held up," he said, "Now, no more talking. Business! Use your nose, and give your mind to it."

They moved on in silence for some little way, when suddenly the Rat was conscious, through his arm that was linked in Mole's, of a faint sort of electric thrill that was passing down that animal's body. Instantly he disengaged himself, fell back a pace, and waited, all attention.

The signals were coming through!

Mole stood a moment rigid, while his uplifted nose, quivering slightly, felt the air.

Then a short, quick run forward—a fault—a check—a try back; and then a slow, steady, confident advance.

The Rat, much excited, kept close to his heels as the Mole, with something of the air of a sleepwalker, crossed a dry ditch, scrambled through a hedge, and nosed his way over a field open and trackless and bare in the faint starlight.

Suddenly, without giving warning, he dived; but the

Rat was on the alert, and promptly followed him down the tunnel to which his unerring nose had faithfully led him.

It was close and airless, and the earthy smell was strong, and it seemed a long time to Rat ere the passage ended and he could stand erect and stretch and shake himself. The Mole struck a match, and by its light the Rat saw that they were standing in an open space, neatly swept and sanded underfoot, and directly facing them was Mole's little front door, with "Mole End" painted, in Gothic lettering, over the bell pull at the side.

Mole reached down a lantern from a nail on the wall and lit it, and the Rat, looking round him, saw that they were in a sort of forecourt. A garden seat stood on one side of the door, and on the other, a roller; for the Mole, who was a tidy animal when at home, could not stand having his ground kicked up by other animals into little runs that ended in earth heaps. On the walls hung wire baskets with ferns in them, alternating with brackets carrying plaster statuary—Garibaldi, and the infant Samuel, and Queen Victoria, and other heroes of modern Italy. Down one side of the forecourt ran a skittle alley, with benches along it and little wooden tables marked with rings that hinted at beer mugs. In the middle was a small round pond containing goldfish and surrounded by a cockleshell border. Out of the centre of the pond rose a fanciful erection clothed in more cockleshells and topped by a large silvered glass ball that reflected everything all wrong and had a very pleasing effect.

Mole's face beamed at the sight of all these objects so dear to him, and he hurried Rat through the door, lit a lamp in the hall, and took one glance round his old home. He saw the dust lying thick on everything, saw the cheerless, deserted look of the long-neglected house, and its nar-

row, meagre dimensions, its worn and shabby contents—and collapsed again on a hall chair, his nose in his paws. "O, Ratty!" he cried dismally, "why ever did I do it? Why did I bring you to this poor, cold little place, on a night like this, when you might have been at River Bank by this time, toasting your toes before a blazing fire, with all your own nice things about you!"

The Rat paid no heed to his doleful self-reproaches. He was running here and there, opening doors, inspecting rooms and cupboards, and lighting lamps and candles and sticking them up everywhere. "What a capital little house this is!" he called out cheerily. "So compact! So well planned! Everything here and everything in its place! We'll make a jolly night of it. The first thing we want is a good fire; I'll see to that—I always know where to find things. So this is the parlour? Splendid! Your own idea, those little sleeping bunks in the wall? Capital! Now, I'll fetch the wood and the coals, and you get a duster, Mole—you'll find one in the drawer of the kitchen table—and try and smarten things up a bit. Bustle about, old chap!"

Encouraged by his inspiriting companion, the Mole roused himself and dusted and polished with energy and heartiness, while the Rat, running to and fro with armfuls of fuel, soon had a cheerful blaze roaring up the chimney. He hailed the Mole to come and warm himself; but Mole promptly had another fit of the blues, dropping down on a couch in dark despair and burying his face in his duster.

"Rat," he moaned, "how about your supper, you poor, cold, hungry, weary animal? I've nothing to give you—nothing—not a crumb!"

"What a fellow you are for giving in!" said the Rat reproachfully. "Why, only just now I saw a sardine opener on the kitchen dresser, quite distinctly; and everybody knows

that means there are sardines about somewhere in the neighbourhood. Rouse yourself! pull yourself together, and come with me and forage."

They went and foraged accordingly, hunting through every cupboard and turning out every drawer. The result was not so very depressing after all, though of course it might have been better; a tin of sardines—a box of captain's biscuits, nearly full—and a German sausage encased in silver paper.

"There's a banquet for you!" observed the Rat, as he arranged the table. "I know some animals who would give their ears to be sitting down to supper with us tonight!"

"No bread!" groaned the Mole dolorously; "no butter, no—"

"No *pâté de foie gras*, no champagne!" continued the Rat, grinning. "And that reminds me—what's that little door at the end of the passage? Your cellar, of course! Every luxury in this house! Just you wait a minute."

He made for the cellar door, and presently reappeared, somewhat dusty, with a bottle of beer in each paw and another under each arm. "Self-indulgent beggar you seem to be, Mole," he observed. "Deny yourself nothing. This is really the jolliest little place I ever was in. Now, wherever did you pick up those prints? Make the place look so home-like, they do. No wonder you're so fond of it, Mole. Tell us all about it, and how you came to make it what it is."

Then, while the Rat busied himself fetching plates, and knives and forks, and mustard which he mixed in an egg-cup, the Mole, his bosom still heaving with the stress of his recent emotion, related—somewhat shyly at first, but with more freedom as he warmed to his subject—how this was planned, and how that was thought out, and how this was got through a windfall from an aunt, and that was a won-

derful find and a bargain, and this other thing was bought out of laborious savings and a certain amount of "going without." His spirits finally quite restored, he must needs go and caress his possessions, and take a lamp and show off their points to his visitor and expatiate on them, quite forgetful of the supper they both so much needed; Rat, who was desperately hungry but strove to conceal it, nodding seriously, examining with a puckered brow, and saying, "Wonderful," and "Most remarkable," at intervals, when the chance for an observation was given him.

At last the Rat succeeded in decoying him to the table, and had just got seriously to work with the sardine opener when sounds were heard from the forecourt without—sounds like the scuffling of small feet in the gravel and a confused murmur of tiny voices, while broken sentences reached them—"Now, all in a line—hold the lantern up a bit, Tommy—clear your throats first—no coughing after I say one, two, three.—Where's young Bill?—Here, come on, do, we're all a-waiting—"

"What's up?" inquired the Rat, pausing in his labours.

"I think it must be the field mice," replied the Mole, with a touch of pride in his manner. "They go round carol singing regularly at this time of the year. They're quite an institution in these parts. And they never pass me over—they come to Mole End last of all; and I used to give them hot drinks, and supper too sometimes, when I could afford it. It will be like old times to hear them again."

"Let's have a look at them!" cried the Rat, jumping up and running to the door.

It was a pretty sight, and a seasonable one, that met their eyes when they flung the door open. In the forecourt, lit by the dim rays of a horn lantern, some eight or ten little field mice stood in a semicircle, red worsted comforters

round their throats, their forepaws thrust deep into their pockets, their feet jiggling for warmth. With bright beady eyes they glanced shyly at each other, sniggering a little, sniffing and applying coat sleeves a good deal. As the door opened, one of the elder ones that carried the lantern was



just saying, "Now then, one, two, three!" and forthwith their shrill little voices uprose on the air, singing one of the old-time carols that their forefathers composed in fields that were fallow and held by frost, or when snowbound in chimney corners, and handed down to be sung in the miry streets to lamplit windows at Yule time.

CAROL

*Villagers all, this frosty tide,
Let your doors swing open wide,
Though wind may follow, and snow beside,
Yet draw us in by your fire to bide;
Joy shall be yours in the morning!*

*Here we stand in the cold and the sleet,
Blowing fingers and stamping feet,
Come from far away you to greet—
You by the fire and we in the street—
Bidding you joy in the morning!*

*For ere one half of the night was gone,
Sudden a star has led us on,
Raining bliss and benison—
Bliss tomorrow and more anon,
Joy for every morning!*

*Goodman Joseph toiled through the snow—
Saw the star o'er a stable low;
Mary she might not further go—
Welcome thatch, and litter below!
Joy was hers in the morning!*

*And then they heard the angels tell
"Who were the first to cry Nowell?
Animals all, as it befell,
In the stable where they did dwell!
Joy shall be theirs in the morning."*

The voices ceased, the singers, bashful but smiling, exchanged sidelong glances, and silence succeeded—but for a moment only. Then, from up above and far away, down the tunnel they had so lately travelled was borne to their ears in a faint musical hum the sound of distant bells ringing a joyful and clangorous peal.

"Very well sung, boys!" cried the Rat heartily. "And now come along in, all of you, and warm yourselves by the fire, and have something hot!"

"Yes, come along, field mice," cried the Mole eagerly. "This is quite like old times! Shut the door after you. Pull up that settle to the fire. Now, you just wait a minute, while we—O, Ratty!" he cried in despair, plumping down on a seat, with tears impending. "Whatever are we doing? We've nothing to give them!"

"You leave all that to me," said the masterful Rat. "Here, you with the lantern! Come over this way. I want to talk to



you. Now, tell me, are there any shops open at this hour of the night?"

"Why, certainly, sir," replied the field mouse respectfully. "At this time of the year our shops keep open to all sorts of hours."

"Then look here!" said the Rat. "You go off at once, you and your lantern, and you get me—"

Here much muttered conversation ensued, and the Mole only heard bits of it, such as—"Fresh, mind!—no, a pound of that will do—see you get Buggins's, for I won't have any other—no, only the best—if you can't get it there, try some-



where else—yes, of course, home-made, no tinned stuff—well then, do the best you can!” Finally, there was a chink of coin passing from paw to paw, the field mouse was provided with an ample basket for his purchases, and off he hurried, he and his lantern.

The rest of the field mice, perched in a row on the settle, their small legs swinging, gave themselves up to enjoyment of the fire, and toasted their chilblains till they tingled; while the Mole, failing to draw them into easy conversation, plunged into family history and made each of them recite the names of his numerous brothers, who were too young, it appeared, to be allowed to go out a-carolling this year, but looked forward very shortly to winning the parental consent.

The Rat, meanwhile, was busy examining the label on one of the beer bottles. “I perceive this to be Old Burton,” he remarked approvingly. “*Sensible Mole!* The very thing! Now we shall be able to mull some ale! Get the things ready, Mole, while I draw the corks.”

It did not take long to prepare the brew and thrust the tin heater well into the red heart of the fire; and soon every field mouse was sipping and coughing and choking (for a little mulled ale goes a long way) and wiping his eyes and laughing and forgetting he had ever been cold in all his life.

“They act plays too, these fellows,” the Mole explained to the Rat. “Make them up all by themselves, and act them afterwards. And very well they do it, too! They gave us a capital one last year, about a field mouse who was captured at sea by a Barbary corsair, and made to row in a galley; and when he escaped and got home again, his lady-love had gone into a convent. Here, *you!* You were in it, I remember. Get up and recite a bit.”

The field mouse addressed got up on his legs, giggled

shyly, looked round the room, and remained absolutely tongue-tied. His comrades cheered him on, Mole coaxed and encouraged him, and the Rat went so far as to take him by the shoulders and shake him; but nothing could overcome his stage fright. They were all busily engaged on him like water men applying the Royal Humane Society's regulations to a case of long submersion, when the latch clicked, the door opened, and the field mouse with the lantern reappeared, staggering under the weight of his basket.

There was no more talk of play-acting once the very real and solid contents of the basket had been tumbled out on the table. Under the generalship of Rat, everybody was set to do something or to fetch something. In a very few minutes supper was ready, and Mole, as he took the head of the table in a sort of dream, saw a lately barren board set thick with savoury comforts; saw his little friends' faces brighten and beam as they fell to without delay; and then let himself loose—for he was famished indeed—on the provender so magically provided, thinking what a happy homecoming this had turned out, after all. As they ate, they talked of old times, and the field mice gave him the local gossip up to date, and answered as well as they could the hundred questions he had to ask them. The Rat said little or nothing, only taking care that each guest had what he wanted, and plenty of it, and that Mole had no trouble or anxiety about anything.

They clattered off at last, very grateful and showering wishes of the season, with their jacket pockets stuffed with remembrances for the small brothers and sisters at home. When the door had closed on the last of them and the chink of the lanterns had died away, Mole and Rat kicked the fire up, drew their chairs in, brewed themselves a last night-cap of mulled ale, and discussed the events of the long day.

At last the Rat, with a tremendous yawn, said, "Mole, old chap, I'm ready to drop. Sleepy is simply not the word. That your own bunk over on that side? Very well, then, I'll take this. What a ripping little house this is! Everything so handy!"

He clambered into his bunk and rolled himself well up in the blankets, and slumber gathered him forthwith, as a swath of barley is folded into the arms of the reaping machine.

The weary Mole also was glad to turn in without delay, and soon had his head on his pillow, in great joy and contentment. But ere he closed his eyes he let them wander round his old room, mellow in the glow of the firelight that played or rested on familiar and friendly things which had long been unconsciously a part of him, and now smilingly received him back, without rancour. He was now in just the frame of mind that the tactful Rat had quietly worked to bring about in him. He saw clearly how plain and simple—how narrow, even—it all was; but clearly, too, how much it all meant to him, and the special value of some such anchorage in one's existence. He did not at all want to abandon the new life and its splendid spaces, to turn his back on sun and air and all they offered him and creep home and stay there; the upper world was all too strong, it called to him still, even down there, and he knew he must return to the larger stage. But it was good to think he had this to come back to, this place which was all his own, these things which were so glad to see him again and could always be counted upon for the same simple welcome.

"Look what you've done *now!*" scolded Shirley.
"Made her cry."

Patti-Cake began to cry even more loudly.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Becky,"
said Matt.

"Oh, you're all a bunch of piss-ants," swore Becky.

"Mama! Mama!" several voices chimed at once.

Olivia appeared at the door, wiping her hands on
her apron.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Becky made Pattie-Cake cry and she ruined the
Christmas Tree with bird poop, and she said a bad
word!" cried Shirley, her eyes blinking with indigna-
tion.

"You asken for a spanken, girl?" inquired Olivia,
fixing Becky with an accusing eye.

Becky refused to reply. She turned her head away,
lifted her chin in the air and pretended she was a rich
city girl in Charlottesville, wrapped in a full length
white mink coat, casually shopping for diamonds at
Keller and George. She had looked in the window
once and ever since had treasured the fact that her eyes
had beheld diamonds.

She was saved from the threatened punishment by
the sounds of footsteps, stomping off snow on the
back porch.

"There's Daddy," several voices shouted in unison,

and like a school of minnows they flowed into the
kitchen and threw open the back door.

Standing on the back porch was Charlie Sneed,
Clay's friend and companion in hunting and fishing,
woodcutting, drinking and poker-playing. Before the
Depression he had worked beside Clay in the machine
shop. Since the mill had closed he had become a back-
woods Robin Hood, poaching game, some of which
he sold in Charlottesville for cash money; the rest he
gave to friends or families he knew to be in special
need.

Charlie's most imposing feature was a large round
belly which he called his "beer keg." Sometimes
Charlie held himself erect and the "beer keg" moved
above and sometimes flowed over his belt. At other
times it simply rested comfortably below his belt.
Charlie was given to patting it fondly, like a mother
fondling some overgrown blob of a child.

Charlie's face was jolly and round. His eyebrows
and his hair were thick curls of reddish blond. When
he smiled his brown eyes twinkled. He looked for all
the world like a rural Santa Claus on his day off, doing
some work around the farm.

"Where's Clay?" asked Charlie as he entered the
kitchen and closed the door behind him.

"He's late tonight," said Olivia.

"Hey there, Mr. Homer, Miss Ida. How y'all?"
asked Charlie.

"Pretty good for old folks," answered Ida.

"Anybody else around here?" asked Charlie mysteriously.

"Just us," answered Olivia wonderingly.

"Ep Bridges been around tonight?"

Ep Bridges was the local sheriff and game warden, the beefy red-neck descendant of a Hessian deserter and a Siouan squaw. He was ardent in his enforcement of law and order, especially those laws concerning the taking of wild game out of season.

"I saw his truck go by once today," answered Olivia. "But he hasn't been around here."

Now Charlie turned to the children who regarded him curiously.

"Can you kids keep your mouths shut if I let you in on a secret?"

"Sure, Charlie," they answered.

With an air of mystery, but yet taking pleasure in what he was doing, Charlie opened the kitchen door and stepped outside. When he came back in he carried a wild turkey gobbler. It had been shot through the head, and its rich bronze and grey and black wing feathers hung down awkwardly.

"I knew Clay wouldn't have a chance to go hunten this Christmas so I thought he'd appreciate a little meat on the table."

Tears welled in Olivia's eyes. She had worried all day about what she would serve for Christmas dinner.

Now she envisioned the turkey, roasted a rich brown, sitting in the middle of the table in her Blue Willow platter.

"We're much obliged to you, Charlie," said Olivia, taking the turkey from him and carrying it to the sink.

"Don't say a thing about it," said Charlie. "It's my pleasure."

"I thought the hunten season was over," said Ida with a faint air of disapproval.

"It is," said Charlie cheerfully.

"Don't it scare you to break the law on Christmas Eve?"

"No, ma'am, it don't," said Charlie firmly. "Why should people go hungry when there's game aplenty?"

"Seems like a sin though," said Ida. "I don't think I could eat it."

"Well, you're goen to, Mama," said Olivia, "if you come to dinner tomorrow. And you stop worryen Charlie. This turkey is the answer to my prayers. I declare, I think I'll cook it tonight! Won't Clay Spencer be surprised when he walks in that door and finds a Christmas turkey roasten in the oven!"

The storm outside seemed less threatening now. Christmas dinner, if nothing else, was assured. She was in her own house and her children were safe from harm. If only Clay were here she could ignore completely the snow-laden wind which roared in baffled rage at the windows and doors.



SEVEN

IN observance of Christmas Eve, Miss Emma and Miss Etta Staples had gotten out of the overalls they usually wore, and changed into finery. It was Emma's idea. Etta was a ninny and never had an idea of her own. It would have been just like her to have forgotten Christmas altogether and worked right through to New Year's. But Emma remembered and it was she who cut the tree and set it up, laid the fire in the seldom-used front room, then briskly climbed the stairs to change.

"Hurry along, Etta," called Emma, passing her sister's door, knowing full well that Etta was such a dreamer that she might lose herself in a magazine and forget why she had come to her room altogether.

"I'm almost ready," Etta called gaily from behind the closed door.

"Wait for me," called Emma. "We'll go down together."

Quickly Emma changed into her good dress, a plain black wool which she had bought in Charlottesville for Papa's funeral. There had been lace at the collar, but Emma did not care for lace and had removed it. Stopping at the dresser, she picked up the cameo brooch which had been her mother's, stuck it in the front of the dress, then touched her hair with a comb. Hair was a nuisance most of the time. Emma cut her own, kept it short and clean, and observed with a twinge that there was more grey present than the last time she had looked. Emma gave her hair one final whack, lay down the comb and left the room.

Hearing Emma's door open, Etta opened her own door and self-consciously walked out into the hall.

"My, Etta!" exclaimed Emma. "You could win a beauty contest!"

Etta had taken some pains with herself and she did indeed look beautiful. Her hair had turned pure white, with none of the yellow which streaked her sister's. She had combed it straight back and put it into a bun, and it framed her small well-made face like a halo. At her throat was a black velvet choker, and the dress she wore was a lavender silk.

"You look nice, too," said Etta, observing the cameo brooch her sister wore. She had wondered where the brooch had gotten off to. She planned to steal it back when the first opportunity arose. She fancied that Emma was constantly stealing her things, and she re-

solved to hide the brooch better once it was back in her possession.

"Where are the decorations, Emma?" asked Etta at the head of the stairway.

"They're already by the tree, just waiting for you to put them up," replied Emma.

"I feel just like when we were little," said Etta happily as they walked into the front room and she saw for the first time the tree which Emma had set up earlier in the day.

Etta opened the box of decorations and was swept into yesterday. Emma watched, taking pleasure in their yearly visit with the decorations they had known since they were children. Out of the box and onto the tree went doves made of spun glass, angels with wings of gauze, ropes of glass beads, a dozen little tin trumpets, stars of gold, and glass bells with glass clappers, a hand-carved Santa Claus and all eight reindeer.

While Etta worked at the tree, Emma arranged the crèche on the old walnut end-table beside the horse-hair sofa. She had placed the Jesus figure in the manger and was reaching for a lamb, when there came a knocking at the front door.

"Someone has run out of Recipe!" said Etta.

"I was sure everybody had laid in a good supply," said Emma and opened the door.

"Who is it?" asked Emma doubtfully, observing the snow-covered figure just beyond the door.

"Clay-Boy Spencer," answered the boy through lips that were numb with cold.

"What a treat!" cried Miss Emma. "Company, Etta!" she called gaily over her shoulder. "It's Clay Spencer's son. Come in! Come in!"

Showers of snow fell away as Clay-Boy removed his cap and scarf, then shook his coat and stamped his feet.

"Why, you're just caked with snow!" said Miss Etta, taking his jacket and hanging it on the clothes rack.

"You look frozen to death," cried Miss Emma. "Come by the fire and warm yourself."

Clay-Boy had been in the kitchen of the Staples' house, but he had never seen the front room. It was grand beyond his imagining. Tasseled lamps rested on heavy hand-carved tables. Two horsehair love seats flanked the fireplace. In a corner an ancient grandfather's clock was stopped at twelve minutes past two, and Miss Etta beamed at him from beside a Christmas Tree which shimmered with all manner of glowing, shining, many-colored ornaments.

"Etta, this boy is frozen through and through. Take off your shoes, Clay-Boy, and let them dry while you visit. Etta, bring some eggnog and put some Recipe in it."

"Don't go to any trouble," said Clay-Boy, but Miss

Etta was already on her way to bring the eggnog. "I can't stay but a minute."

"Nonsense," said Miss Emma. "Take off those wet shoes before you come down with lung trouble. The socks, too. They're soaking wet."

"It's a wonder you haven't got frostbite," said Miss Emma when Clay-Boy's feet, blue with cold, were exposed. "You sit down and wait right here."

Now Miss Emma left the room also and Clay-Boy sat down on the love seat and held his feet out toward the warmth of the fireplace. He felt silly, but he was grateful as the numbing cold began to seep out of his fingers and toes.

Miss Emma and Miss Etta returned together. Miss Emma carried a large steaming pan of water which she placed at his feet.

"Soak your feet in this hot water," she commanded. "It will ward off lung disease."

Obediently Clay-Boy placed his feet in the pan, feeling sillier by the minute, but knowing it was useless to argue with the two old ladies.

"Doesn't that feel better now?" asked Miss Emma.

"Yes, ma'am," he answered.

Now Miss Etta came forward carrying a tray on which she had arranged a silver pitcher and three silver mugs.

"This will warm you up," she promised. Clay-Boy

accepted one of the mugs, which was filled with eggnog lightly sprinkled with cinnamon. Something in it warmed him all the way to the pit of his stomach, and once it rested there, radiated throughout the rest of his body. Miss Emma and Miss Etta waited expectantly for some reaction from him.

"It's powerful good," said Clay-Boy. "What's in it?"

"It's Papa's Recipe," explained Miss Emma. "Papa used to make it all the time and then when he passed on we used to get so many calls for it that Sister and I just kept on making it. Drink hearty. There's plenty."

"We had a gentleman stop in last week all the way from Warrenton, Virginia," said Miss Etta. "He loved it so he took a whole gallon back home with him."

"It gives us something to do in our old age," said Miss Emma, "and it makes people happy, so I can't see why we shouldn't keep right on providing. Etta, help Clay-Boy to another cup of eggnog."

Miss Etta poured, and Clay-Boy accepted the re-filled cup gratefully. He was warm now from head to toe and he was beginning to feel so lightheaded and relaxed that it seemed the most natural thing in the world to be sitting with the two antique ladies, sipping eggnog while his feet soaked in a pan of hot water.

"How are your mother and all those dear children?" inquired Miss Etta.

"Everybody's just fine," said Clay-Boy between sips of the warming eggnog.

"There are eight now, I believe," said Miss Etta.

"Yes, ma'am," replied Clay-Boy. "Last time we counted it was eight."

"Your father never comes but what he says for us to come over and visit," observed Miss Emma, "but we never seem to get out any more."

"We're getting old," said Miss Etta proudly. "Hard to get around when you're old."

"Your daddy says you make good grades at school," said Miss Emma, looking at Clay-Boy appraisingly.

"Yes, ma'am."

"What are you going to do with your life?"

"I don't know yet."

"What do you want to do with it?"

"They seem to think real high of Daddy over where he works. He says they'll put me on over there if I learn a trade."

"Are you interested in taking up a trade?"

"None that I know of. Maybe I'll find somethen," said Clay-Boy.

"If you had your choice, what would you be?"

Clay-Boy had never confessed his secret yearning to anyone in the world before, but the eggnog while warming him had also released his inhibitions.

"You know these Big Five tablets?" he asked. "Like you do homework in?"

Miss Emma nodded interestedly.

"I keep one under my mattress."

"You're just like Etta," said Miss Emma. "She hides things under her mattress too."

"Just letters from my beaux," said Miss Etta, then turned accusingly to her sister. "And now that I know you've been snooping I'm going to hide them somewhere else."

"Her beaux!" cried Miss Emma derisively. "Way she tells it you'd think she had a regular Hallelujah Chorus lined up at the gate."

"I wonder what ever happened to Ashley Longworth," sighed Miss Etta.

"Papa chased him off is what happened," Miss Emma reminded her.

Miss Etta said wistfully: "Once when we were in Charlottesville we were walking along and I thought I saw him, the back of his head, walking along in front of me. I nearly ran, trying to catch up with him, but when I did, the man was a stranger. He could never have been Ashley Longworth. Ashley had fine features. He came from a good family, and he was a gentleman. Emma, why didn't Papa like him?"

"I don't remember any more," said Emma. "Nobody was ever good enough for Papa."

"I never told you this, Emma," said Miss Etta, "but Ashley Longworth kissed me one time."

"If you've told me once you've told me a thousand times," sighed Miss Emma.

"He was a student, you see," Miss Etta continued, ignoring her sister's bored expression, "over at the University. He liked hunting and fishing, and somehow found his way out here, and asked permission to hunt on Papa's land. Papa said yes, and Ashley just got to be a regular fixture out here every weekend. Wasn't he a handsome thing, Emma?"

"Knew it, too," commented Emma from her chair where she sipped her eggnog reflectively.

"Anything that handsome had to know it," Miss Etta commented and turned back to Clay-Boy. "On my twenty-fifth birthday, October 19, 1902, Ashley was here as usual and he asked me to go for a walk with him. The woods were on fire with color, and we stopped beneath a maple tree that had turned blood-red. There was a little breeze and a shower of leaves fell around us. Ashley reached up very impulsively and touched my cheek and that was when he kissed me."

"Having no idea that Papa was standing a hundred feet away," said Miss Emma.

"Papa was very upset about it all. Ashley left that evening and I heard from him once, a farewell letter, you might call it, and then nothing. I think of him often, but as the years went by and no more word of

him came, I decided he must have died in one of the wars."

Clay-Boy shook his head sympathetically as Miss Etta turned away and gazed thoughtfully at the Christmas Tree.

"Ah me!" said Miss Emma to no one in particular and, for a while, each of them was alone with his separate thoughts.

"Etta, put a record on the Victrola," said Miss Emma. Etta had been sitting looking dreamily at the Christmas Tree, and did not hear. "Etta!" called Miss Emma sternly.

Miss Etta rose and floated to the Victrola. She searched about in the storage cabinet beneath the machine, found a record and placed it on the turntable.

"It probably needs winding," advised Miss Emma. "It hasn't been used since the last time we had a party."

"That was before Papa died," said Miss Etta as she cranked the handle of the Victrola. "Remember his cousins from Buckingham County dropped in; he hadn't seen them in years. He brought them all in here and we played hymns and sang and afterward everybody cried and hugged."

"Papa was a rounder," said Miss Emma reflectively. She refilled her silver mug with eggnog and then, noting that Clay-Boy's mug was empty, filled his, too.

Miss Etta moved the lever which turned on the

Victrola, placed the needle in the groove, and stood with hands folded while the machine made a couple of preliminary scratchy revolutions.

Then music came into the room and the two old women and the boy listened silently as Enrico Caruso sang "It Came upon a Midnight Clear."

For a moment when the song was over, they remained still.

"The nice thing about life," said Miss Etta, "is you never know when there's going to be a party."

"It wouldn't of been if Clay-Boy Spencer hadn't taken it in mind to stop in," said Miss Emma.

When Clay-Boy realized that they thought the object of his trip had been to pay a call, he decided not to tell them otherwise. His father was obviously not there, nor had he been there, for the old ladies would surely have mentioned it.

But now when he looked there were four old ladies, a twin Miss Emma and a twin Miss Etta, their images blurring and wavering into each other. His lips and his tongue were edged with numbness, and he would have liked nothing better than to have stretched out and gone to sleep.

He roused himself and with some difficulty managed to stand upright, although the rest of the room swam unsteadily.

"I certainly appreciate everything," he said in the general direction of his hostesses.

"Oh, you mustn't go yet," cried Miss Etta. "It's still the shank of the evening!"

"No, ma'am, I expect it's gotten along toward eleven o'clock."

"How are you traveling, Clay-Boy?" asked Miss Emma.

"On foot, ma'am," he replied.

"Why, you'll never get home walken in this weather," said Miss Etta, "unless Santa Claus comes along and gives you a lift."

"It's a bad night out there, Clay-Boy," said Miss Emma. "Why don't you stay here? We'll make you comfortable."

"I appreciate it, but my folks would worry."

Suddenly Miss Etta rose and crossed to her sister and whispered something in her ear. She looked back to Clay-Boy briefly. "Excuse my bad manners," she said, and then the two ladies held a brief whispered conference.

At the end of it, Miss Emma rose, fixed an eye on Clay-Boy and said, "Wait here."

When her sister left the room, Miss Etta gazed at Clay-Boy with a sweet smile and said, "We've arranged a little surprise for you."

Clay-Boy looked worriedly after Miss Emma as he heard a door slam at the back of the house.

"I really ought to be gotten home."

"Oh, you'll be home before you know it," said Miss Etta. "Now get into your things while I get the blankets!"

Clay-Boy felt he had fallen into the clutches of two old Christmas witches and he was tempted to slip out of the front door before either of them returned with whatever insane plan they had for getting him home.

He felt his socks, which had been hanging by the fireplace and, grateful that they were almost dry, he slipped them on. His shoes were stiff from having dried so close to the fire, but he slipped them on his feet and was lacing them up when Miss Etta appeared at the foot of the stairway. She had put on an old fur coat with a hat to match and she carried several lap robes in her arms.

"Wouldn't you like one more eggnog?" she called. "A small one for the road?"

"I had just enough," said Clay-Boy.

"It does make you feel good, doesn't it?" said Miss Etta gaily.

"Yes, ma'am," replied Clay-Boy who could hardly feel anything at all.

From somewhere outside the house came the silver jingle of bells.

"There she is!" cried Miss Etta, grabbing up the pile of blankets. "Come!" she called and rushed toward the front door.

Clay-Boy drew in his breath at the magic landscape beyond the door. The snow had stopped and the sky was a deep blue without a cloud in sight. A full moon shone down on an expanse of virgin snow, and waiting in the driveway was Miss Emma Staples in a horse-drawn sleigh.

"It's Papa's sleigh," explained Miss Etta. "We've kept it dusted and polished all these years. Just waiting for an occasion!"

"Hurry up before Lady Esther falls asleep again," called Miss Emma. Lady Esther, an old black mare, was the only one who showed no enthusiasm for the journey.

Clay-Boy helped Miss Etta into the sleigh, then climbed in after her.

"Gee hup!" called Miss Emma while Miss Etta arranged blankets over everybody's knees.

Lady Esther moved forward through the snow, and once she discovered the ease with which the sleigh flowed gently behind her, she seemed to warm to her job and broke into a lively canter.

"Oh my!" exclaimed Miss Etta as each turning of the road revealed a new white landscape that glittered and sparkled in the moonlight.

"What a treat!" exclaimed Miss Emma as she listened to the merrily jingling bells pealing out across the still night.

Oh, God, thought Clay-Boy. Good manners decreed that he should ask the two old sisters in when they arrived at his home. Mama would hit the roof!



NINE

OLIVIA and Clay-Boy sat in the living room. Olivia had brought the wind-up kitchen alarm clock out with her and it sat on the table beside her chair, where its ticking seemed to fill the room.

Olivia had been drowsing, but now when she woke and saw that it was one o'clock, she called softly, "Clay-Boy."

"Hum?" he asked sleepily.

"You go on to bed now."

"I'll wait a little while longer, Mama."

"No, you're sitten there half asleep. Just go on upstairs and lay down."

"Where you reckon he is, Mama?"

"I don't know any more than you do, son."

"I'll go up and lay down, but I'll keep my clothes on, just in case any word comes."

"I don't expect to hear a word before mornen," said Olivia.

"Good night, Mama," he said at the landing.

"Good night, son."

He was about to call "Merry Christmas," but it was obviously going to be anything but merry so he held his tongue. Tiptoeing, carefully, picking his way around boards that squeaked he made his way to the top of the stairs.

"What time is it, Clay-Boy?" called Becky in a whisper as he passed the room the girls slept in.

"Time for you to be asleep," he whispered, and continued on down the hall to the boys' room.

His brothers, two in each bed, were asleep. Luke had kicked his covers off, so Clay-Boy pulled the blankets and the homemade quilt up and tucked it around Luke's shoulders.

Clay-Boy was starting for his own bed when there came an enormous crash on the roof. At the same moment from somewhere in the backyard someone could be heard shouting and cursing. Again the thudding noise came on the roof and in the next moment the stairway was alive with pounding feet and cries of alarm as each child scrambled downstairs to find his mother.

Olivia was already on her way to the back door when Clay-Boy, followed by the children, ran into the kitchen.

"What in God's name is it?" he cried.

His mother's face was twisted with worry.

"It sounds like your daddy, but I don't know!"

The children stopped their onrush and huddled together at the living room door as Olivia unlocked the back door and apprehensively swung it open. Framed in the doorway was Clay Spencer, half-frozen, an impish grin on his face, his arms overflowing with bundles.

"I've been worried sick about you," said Olivia but her voice broke, and she buried her face in her hands and wept.

"Mama, don't cry," said Clay-Boy. "He's home!"

Struggling with packages, Clay entered. He placed his bundles down on the table, knelt and opened his arms and immediately they were filled with children, brushing the snow from his face, hugging him around the neck, crushing his chest with their frantic embraces.

Now he rose and the children watched with delight as he crossed the floor to Olivia. He kissed her tenderly on the cheek, but then, and this was what the children were waiting for, he picked her up and danced about the kitchen shouting joyously, "God, what a woman I married!" while Olivia shouted indignantly, "Put me down, you old fool!"

Finally he placed her back on the floor. Olivia adjusted her clothing with mock annoyance and demanded, "Where in the world have you been?"

"I missed the last bus out of Charlottesville, so I

hitchhiked to Hickory Creek. From there it was every blessed step of the way on foot."

"Well, you must be nearly frozen. I've been keepen coffee warm." Olivia went to get cup and saucer, and poured the coffee. Clay took his seat at the head of the kitchen table and grinned as he saw the children casting appraising glances at the packages.

"What's in them bundles, Daddy?" asked Luke.

"Beats the tar out of me," replied Clay.

"Where'd they come from?" asked Shirley.

"Well, I'll tell you," said Clay, lowering his voice confidentially. "I was comen up the walk there a minute ago, knowen you kids were asleep, I tried not to make any noise. All of a sudden somethen come flyen across the sky and landed right on top of the house."

"We heard it!" cried Mark and John.

"Well, I looked up and there was a team of some kind of animals about the size of a year-old calf. Somethen kind of pointy on the heads."

"Reindeer," supplied Pattie-Cake.

"I never saw one, but that's what it was all right. Well, it kind of stopped me in my tracks, and I just stood there watchen. First thing I see, this old son-of-a-gun jumped out, all dressed up in black boots and a red suit trimmed with white fur."

"Santa Claus!" whispered John.

"Well, I never laid eyes on the old poot before. Didn't know who he was. I just thought it was somebody tryen to break into the house, so I picked up the biggest rock I could find, and . . ."

Horror stared back at him. "You hit him with a rock!"

"Not exactly, but I scared him so that the sleigh started slippen off the roof and landed right out there in the backyard. The old man in the red suit started cracken the whip and called for them reindeer to take off, but I caught up with him just before that sleigh left the ground."

"You talked to him?" asked Pattie-Cake wonderingly.

"No, but I wrassled him, and just before he got away I grabbed a big armful of stuff from the sleigh and there it is right on the table."

"You see!" said Pattie-Cake victoriously to Becky. "He's real!"

"You're right, honey," nodded Becky with a smile. "You're double-durned right."

"Which one is mine?" asked Pattie-Cake, touching the packages shyly.

"Try that one," said Clay, pointing to a package. "And this one's for you, and this one's for you," he said until all the bundles had been passed out, except one which stood alone.

Cries and shrieks of joy filled the room as Pattie-Cake removed a brand new golden-haired doll which cried and opened and closed its eyes. Becky and Shirley were holding up brand new dresses, and each of the children uncovered treasure after treasure as they went deeper and deeper into their packages: monkeys that magically climbed up strings, teddy bears with soft fur and button noses, jumping jacks which performed virtuoso acrobatics, jack-knives with so many blades that when they opened they resembled a Chinese fan, bouncing balls that jingled, banks in the form of mules which kicked when a penny was inserted, cookie cutters and tea sets, catcher's mitts and footballs, balloons and whistles and spinning tops, and firecrackers and warm socks, and boxes of puzzles and oranges and nuts and candies and still the bottoms of the bags were not yet reached.

"Open yours, son," said Clay to Clay-Boy, who held his package in his arms while he watched his brothers and sisters exclaim with breathless astonishment as they discovered each new treasure.

Self-consciously Clay-Boy tore the wrapper open and he looked at his father with confusion and gratitude and questioning eyes as he found five tablets of good writing paper and a brand new fountain pen.

"I wonder how news got all the way to the North Pole that you wanted to be a writer," said Clay with a grin.

"I guess he's a right smart man," said Clay-Boy, his throat almost too full to speak.

"This one must be for you," said Clay to Olivia, pointing to the one package still remaining on the table.

"What in the world could it be?"

"You been wishen for springtime," said Clay, and placed the package in her hands.

"Oh, Clay," cried Olivia and gazed down at a flower pot containing three hyacinths, one blue, one white, and one rose and all in full bloom.

Pattie-Cake, cradling her doll in her arms, suddenly became aware of something which saddened her, and her lips quivered.

"You didn't get nothen, Daddy," she said. Gently Clay lifted the little girl in his arms and looked around the room at his family.

"Sweetheart," he said, "I've got Christmas every day of my life in you kids and your mama." He turned to Olivia. "Did you ever see such thoroughbreds?"

"I see some sleepy children," said Olivia. "Off to bed now. You can play in the mornen."

"Can't I shoot just one firecracker, Mama?" pleaded Matt.

Olivia considered, but then she smiled and unexpectedly answered "Yes." It'll wake everybody within ten miles, she thought, but she didn't care. Let the world know that Clay Spencer was home.

As the children filed out onto the back porch to watch Matt light the firecracker, Olivia came and sat across from Clay. She looked at him, and then at the hyacinths, and reproach would not come.

"You must have spent every cent of the paycheck," she said. She tried to sound cross but somehow she didn't succeed.

"Just about," he admitted cheerfully.

"What are we goen to live on this comen week?" she asked.

"Love, woman," he said, and this time he did not seize her in his arms and waltz madly about the room, but kissed her gently and took her hand in his.

"BOOM!" went the five-inch firecracker, and "boom" it resounded across the hills, falling away into the distance like thunder. Now the children came running into the house, their faces alight with the excitement of it all.

"Bed time," said their father, and with only a few objections the children marched upstairs and pulled the covers once more over their heads.

But nobody went to sleep.

They waited until they heard the familiar sounds of lights being turned off down stairs, the passage of their mother and father down the hall to their bedroom, and the click of the light being switched off.

From the girls' room Becky called, "Good night,

Luke," and Luke answered, "Good night, Becky; good night, Pattie-Cake." And Pattie-Cake called, "Good night, Luke; good night, Mama."

And Olivia answered, "Good night, Pattie-Cake; good night, Shirley." Other voices joined in a round song of good nights until all the people in the house had said so many good nights that they could not remember whom they had said good night to and whom they had not. To keep the whole good-night chorus from starting all over again, Clay called "Good night, everybody, and Merry Christmas!" and gave a long sleepy yawn, which was the signal that everyone had been bidden a proper good night. The house fell silent and they slept.

Around the house the world lay bright as day. The moon blazed down its cold light on an earth that was touched with magic. An ancient wind sighed along the ridges of crusted snow. Angels sang, and the stars danced in the sky.

OLIVIA'S APPLESAUCE CAKE

1 cup of butter	3 ½ cups flour (sifted)
1 cup sugar	2 eggs
2 cups applesauce	1 teaspoon cinnamon
2 cups light raisins	2 teaspoons cloves
1 cup chopped walnuts	2 teaspoons nutmeg
1 teaspoon baking soda	Pinch of salt

Sift together: Flour, baking soda, salt, cinnamon, cloves and nutmeg. Take ½ cup of flour mixture and stir into the nuts and raisins. Set both aside. Cream butter until whipped soft. Add sugar a little at a time until mixture is smooth. Beat in eggs vigorously. Alternately stir in flour mixture and applesauce. When all mixed together add nuts and raisins and mix well. Pour batter into a well-greased cake mold. Bake in preheated oven at 350° for one hour. Cool ten minutes, then turn out on cake rack. Frost with Whiskey Frosting when cake is cool.

JANE'S WHISKEY FROSTING

¼ cup butter	2 cups powdered sugar
1 tablespoon cream	2 tablespoons whiskey (bourbon)
	Pinch of salt

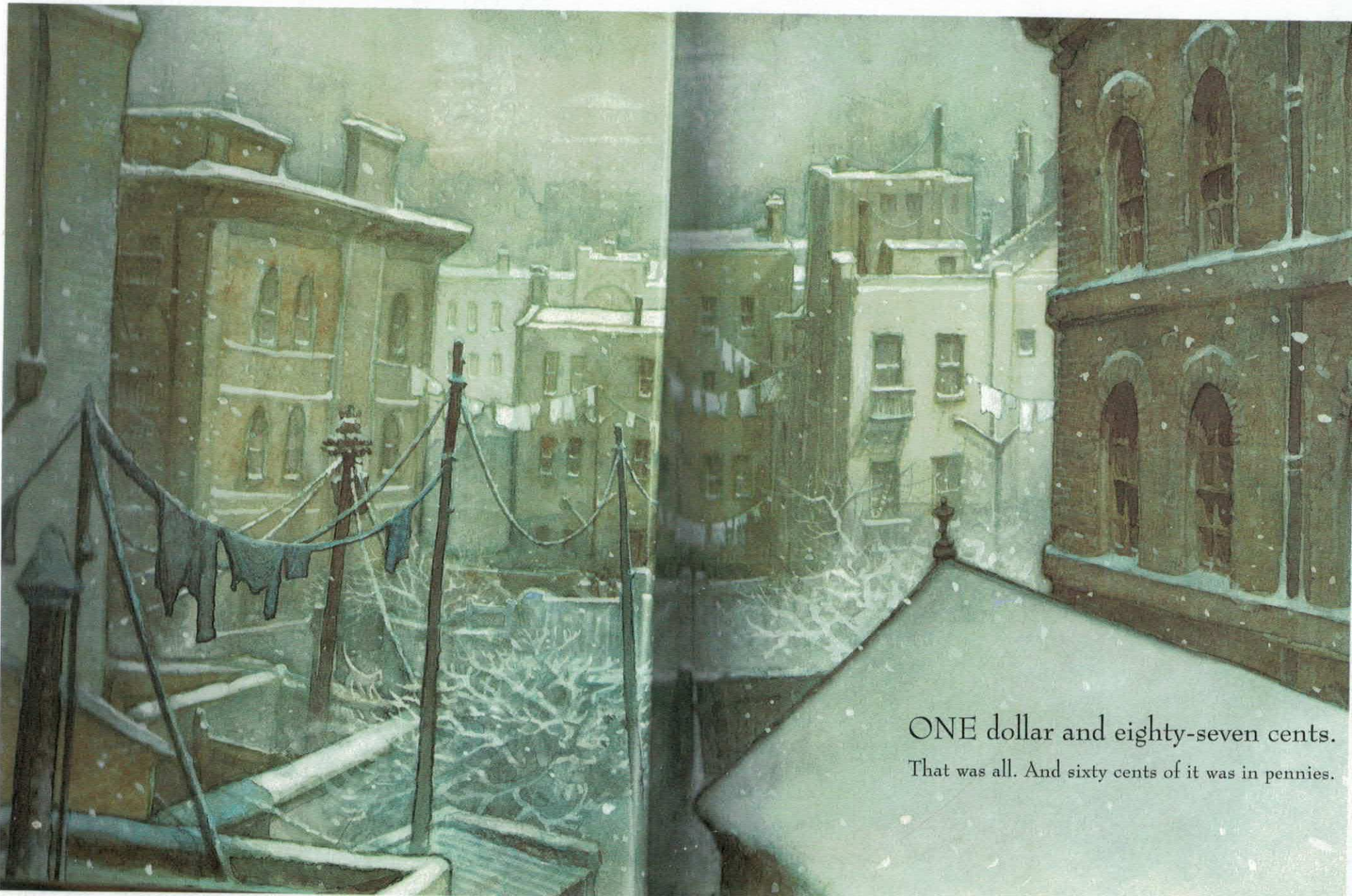
Cream butter, add sugar and salt, then cream and whiskey. Whip until smooth. Frost cake. Decorate with a sprig of holly.



*The
Gift of the
Magi*

O. HENRY ILLUSTRATED BY P.J. LYNCH





ONE dollar and eighty-seven cents.
That was all. And sixty cents of it was in pennies.

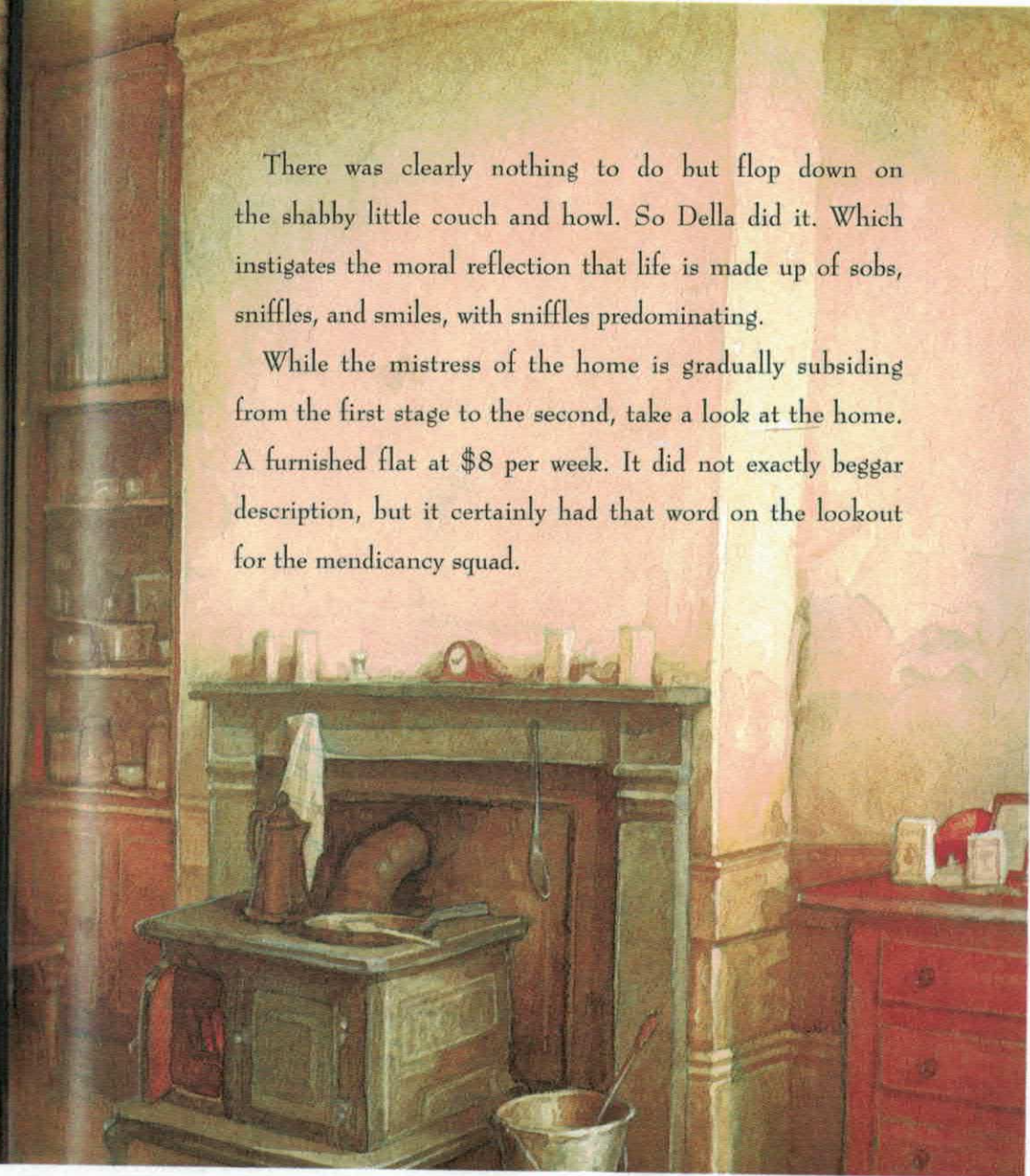
Pennies saved one and two at a time by bulldozing the grocer and the vegetable man and the butcher until one's cheeks burned with the silent imputation of parsimony that such close dealing implied. Three times Della counted it. One dollar and eighty-seven cents. And the next day would be Christmas.





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

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





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

The "Dillingham" had been flung to the breeze during a former period of prosperity when its possessor was being paid \$30 per week. Now, when the income was shrunk to \$20, the letters of "Dillingham" looked blurred, as though they were thinking seriously of contracting to a

modest and unassuming D. But whenever Mr. James Dillingham Young came home and reached his flat above he was called "Jim" and greatly hugged by Mrs. James Dillingham Young, already introduced to you as Della. Which is all very good.

Della finished her cry and attended to her cheeks with the powder rag. She stood by the window and looked out dully at a gray cat walking a gray fence in a gray backyard. Tomorrow would be Christmas Day, and she had only \$1.87 with which to buy Jim a present.



She had been saving every penny she could for months, with this result. Twenty dollars a week doesn't go far. Expenses had been greater than she had calculated. They always are. Only \$1.87 to buy a present for Jim. Her Jim. Many a happy hour she had spent planning for something nice for him. Something fine and rare and sterling—something just a little bit near to being worthy of the honour of being owned by Jim.

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

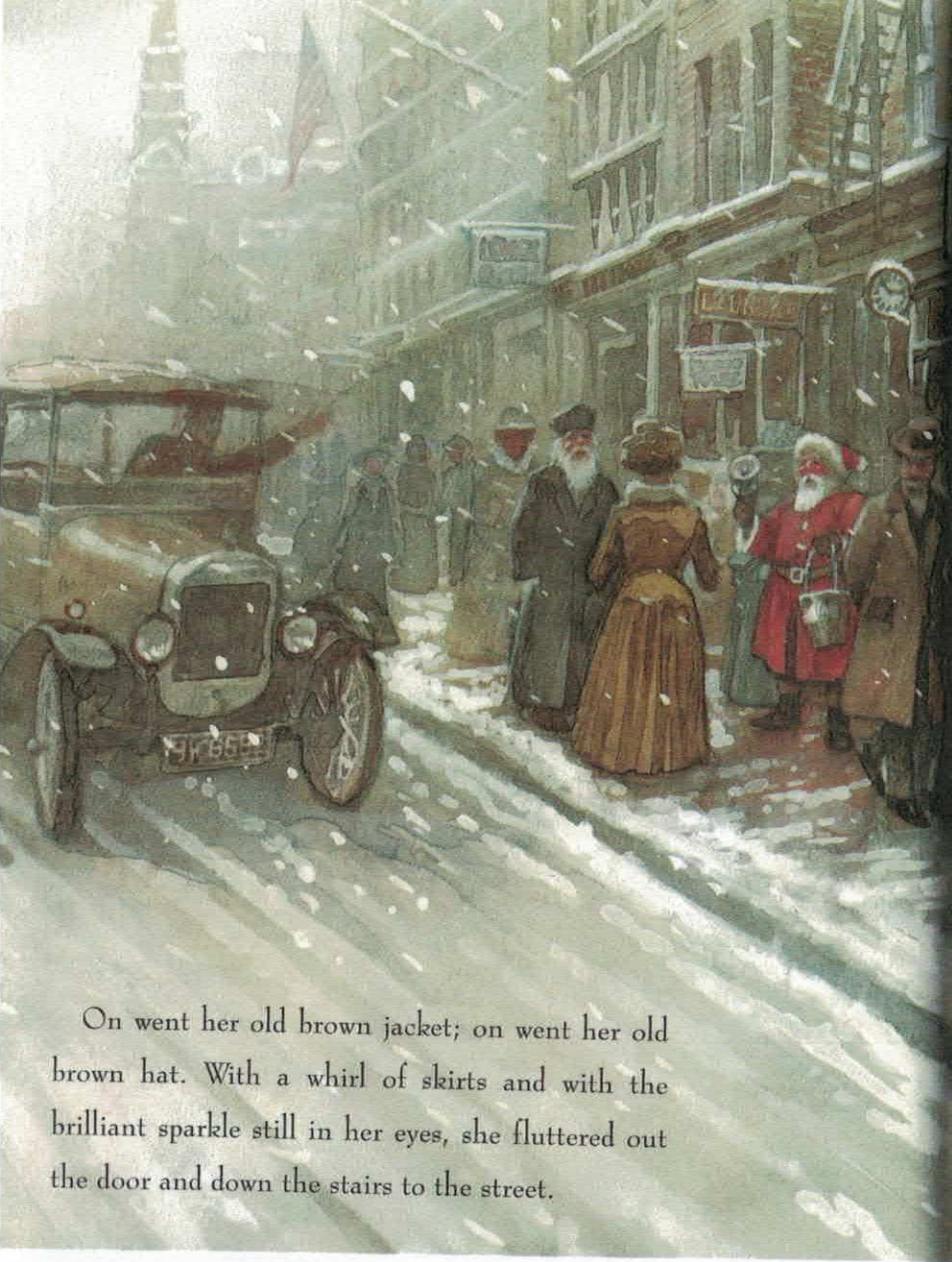
Suddenly she whirled from the window and stood before the glass. Her eyes were shining brilliantly, but her face had lost its colour within twenty seconds. Rapidly she pulled down her hair and let it fall to its full length.





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

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



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



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

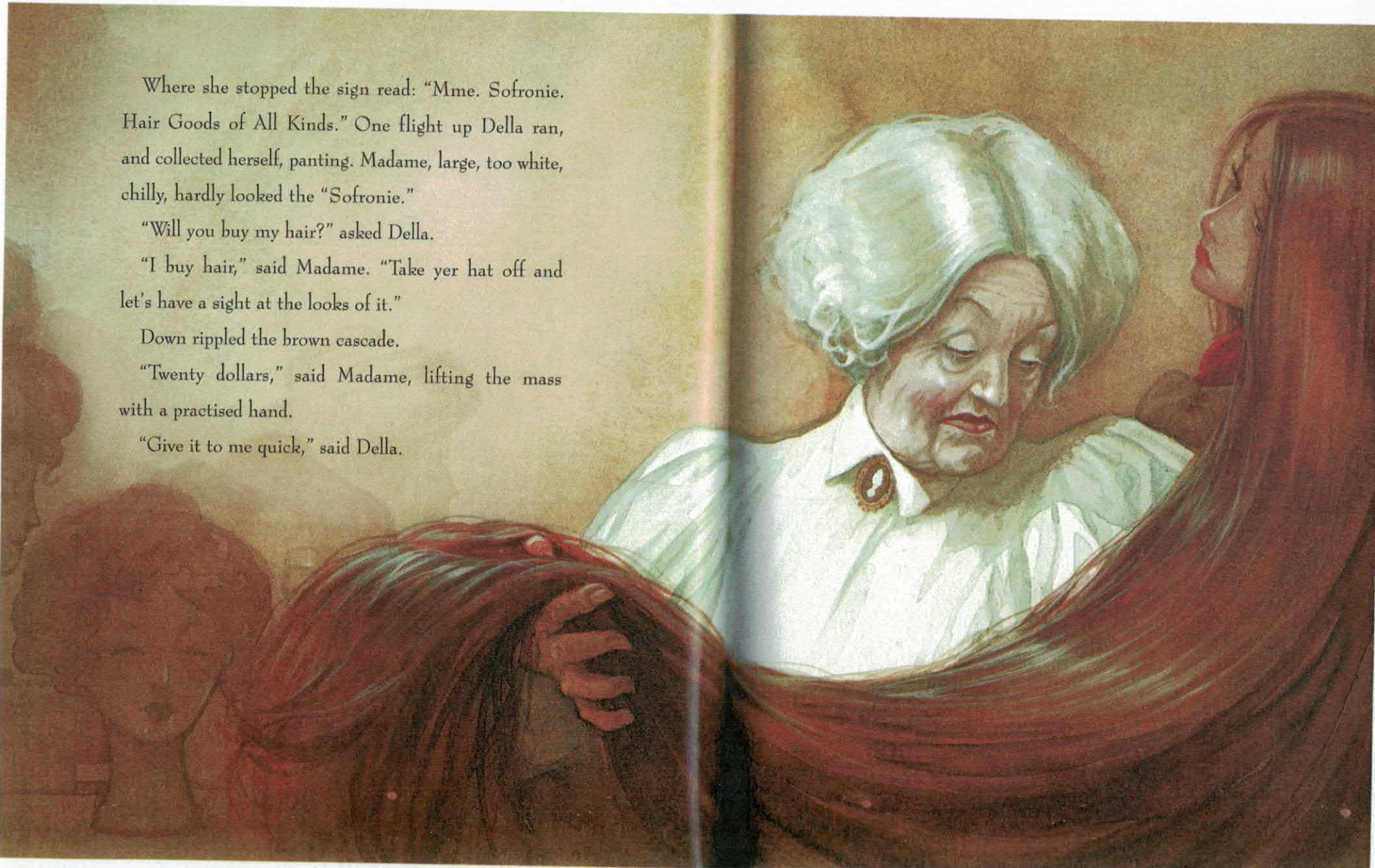
"Will you buy my hair?" asked Della.

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

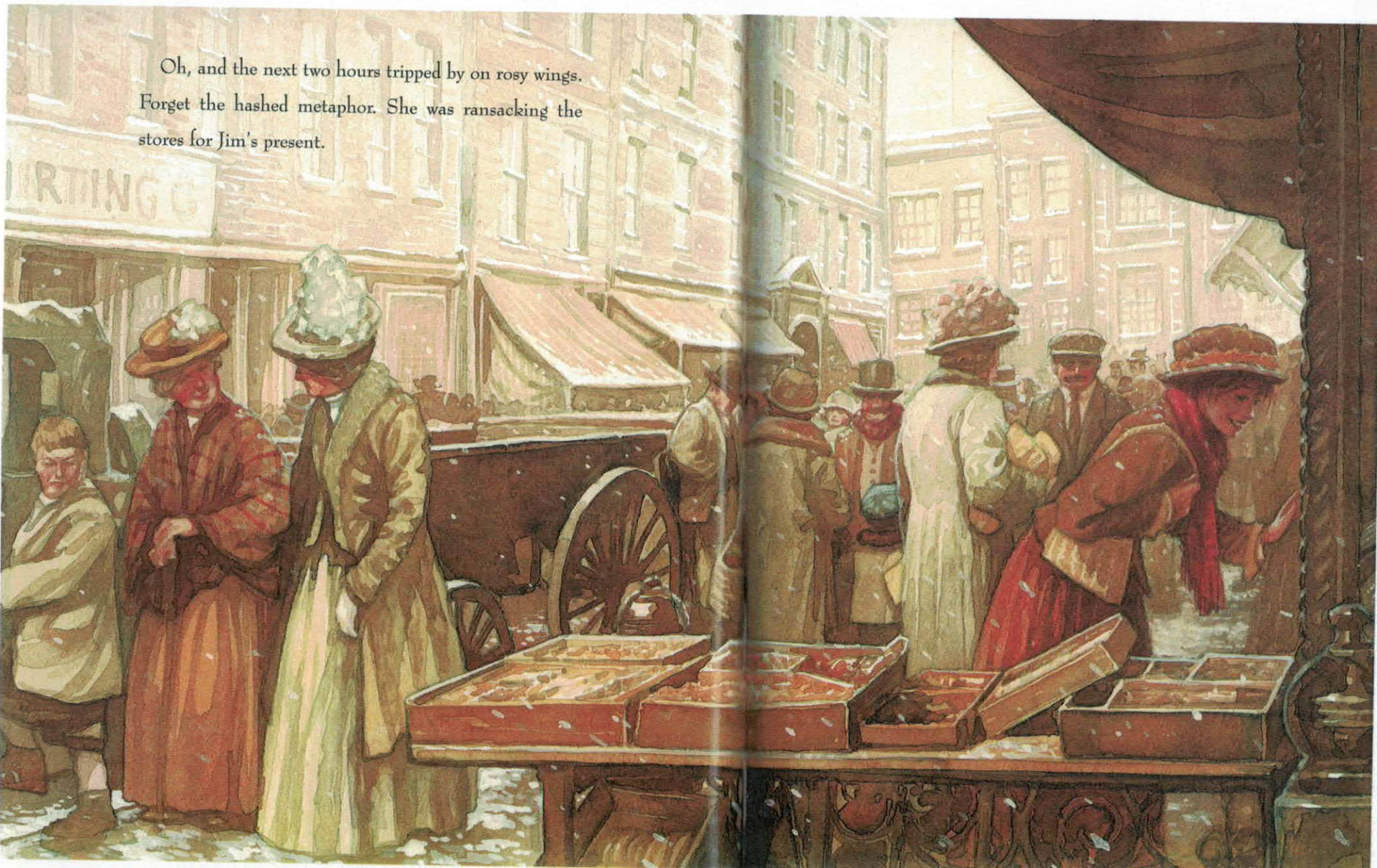
Down rippled the brown cascade.

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

"Give it to me quick," said Della.



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





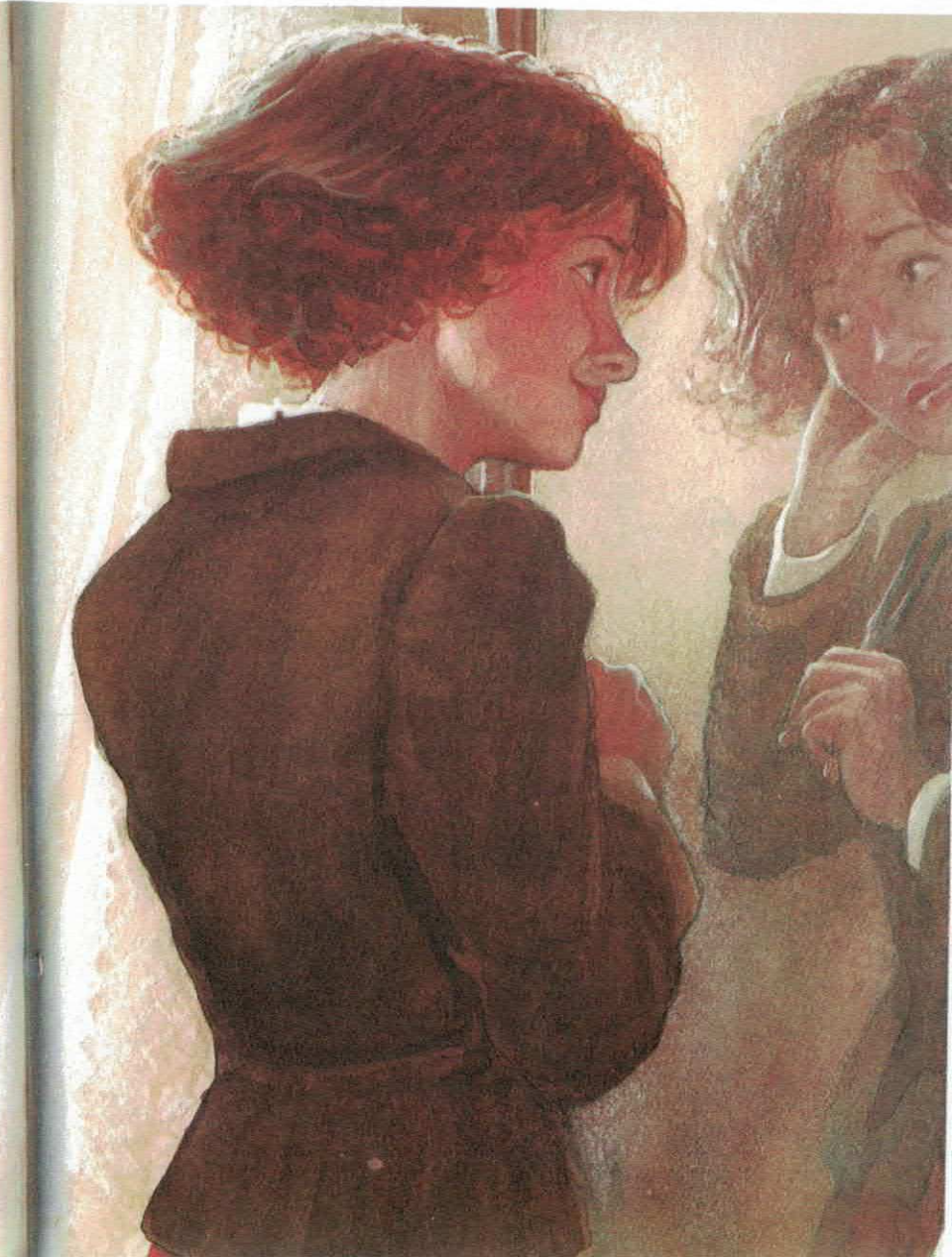
She found it at last. It surely had been made for Jim and no one else. There was no other like it in any of the stores, and she had turned all of them inside out. It was a platinum fob chain simple and chaste in design, properly proclaiming its value by substance alone and not by meretricious ornamentation—as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



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

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

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





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

Jim was never late. Della doubled the fob chain in her hand and sat on the corner of the table near the door that he always entered. Then she heard his step on the stair away down on the first flight, and she turned white for just a moment. She had a habit 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 simply stared at her fixedly with that peculiar expression on his face.

Della wriggled off the table and went for him.



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

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

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

Jim looked about the room curiously.

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

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



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



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

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

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

For there lay The Combs—the set of combs, side and back, that Della had worshipped for long in a Broadway window. Beautiful combs, pure tortoise shell, with jewelled rims—just the shade to wear in the beautiful vanished hair. They were

expensive combs, she knew, and her heart had simply craved and yearned over them without the least hope of possession. And now, they were hers, but the tresses that should have adorned the coveted adornments were gone.

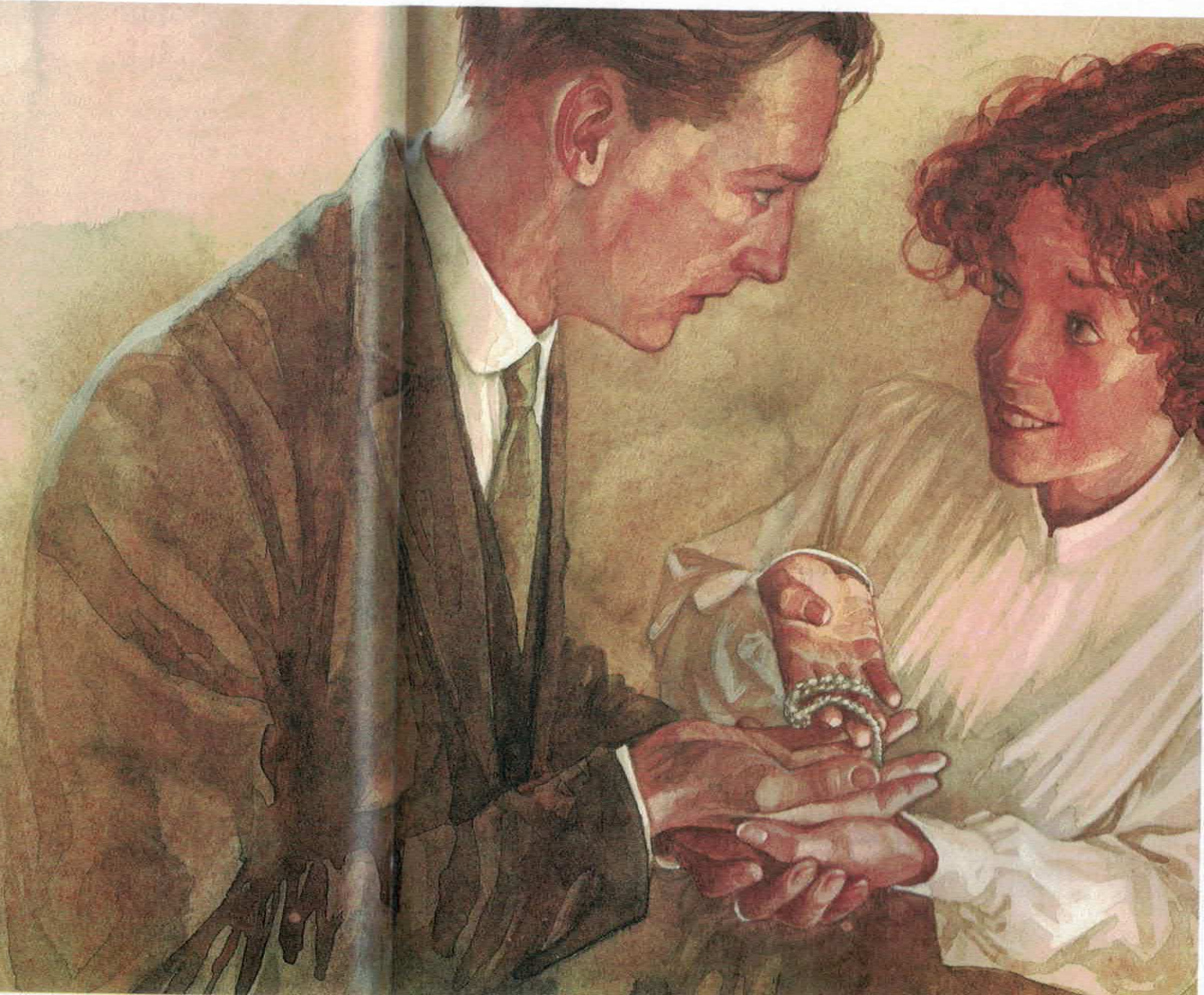
But she hugged them to her bosom, and at length she was able to look up with dim eyes and a smile and say: "My hair grows so fast, Jim!"



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

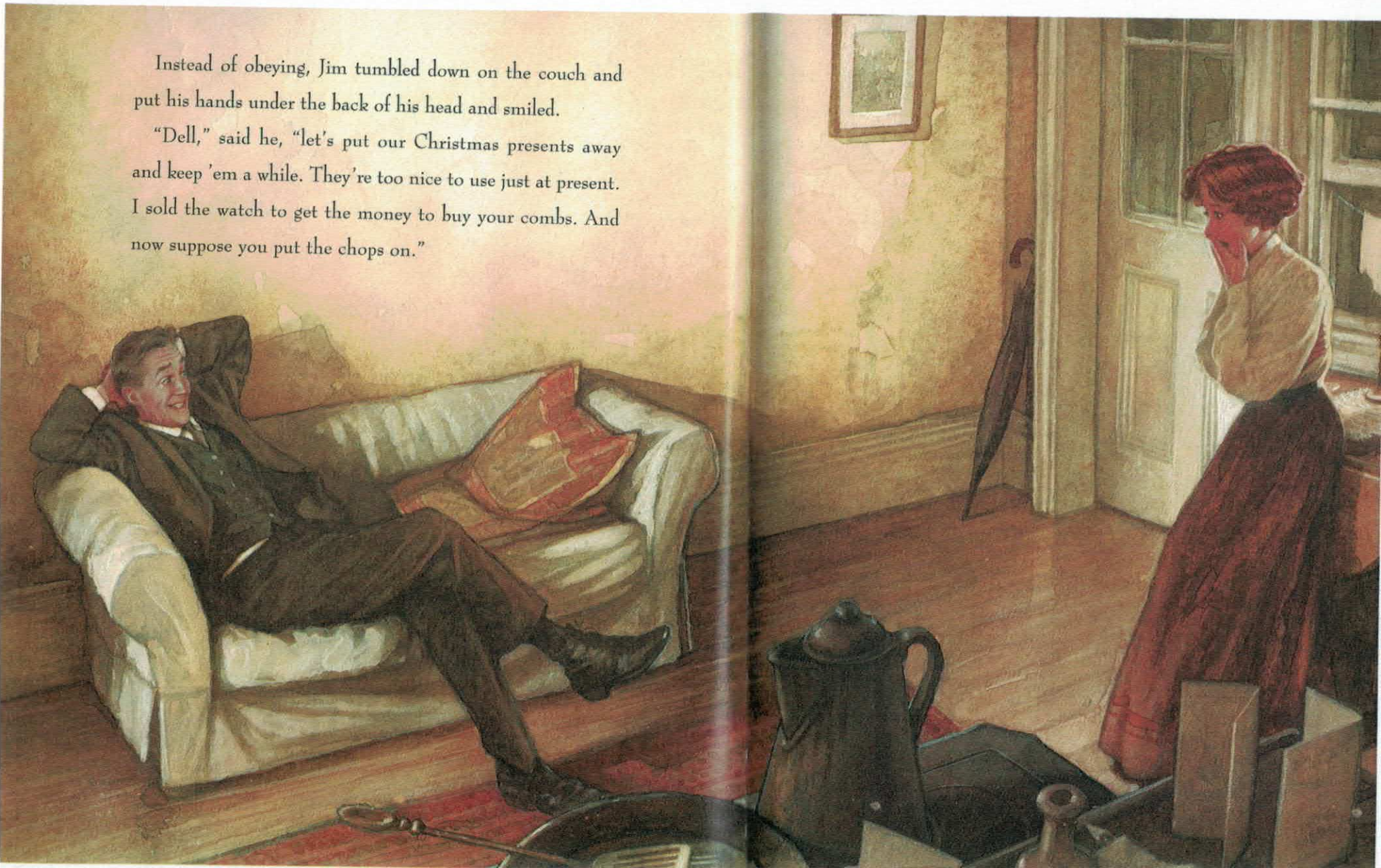
Jim had not yet seen his beautiful present. She held it out to him eagerly upon her open palm. The dull precious metal seemed to flash with a reflection of her bright and ardent spirit.

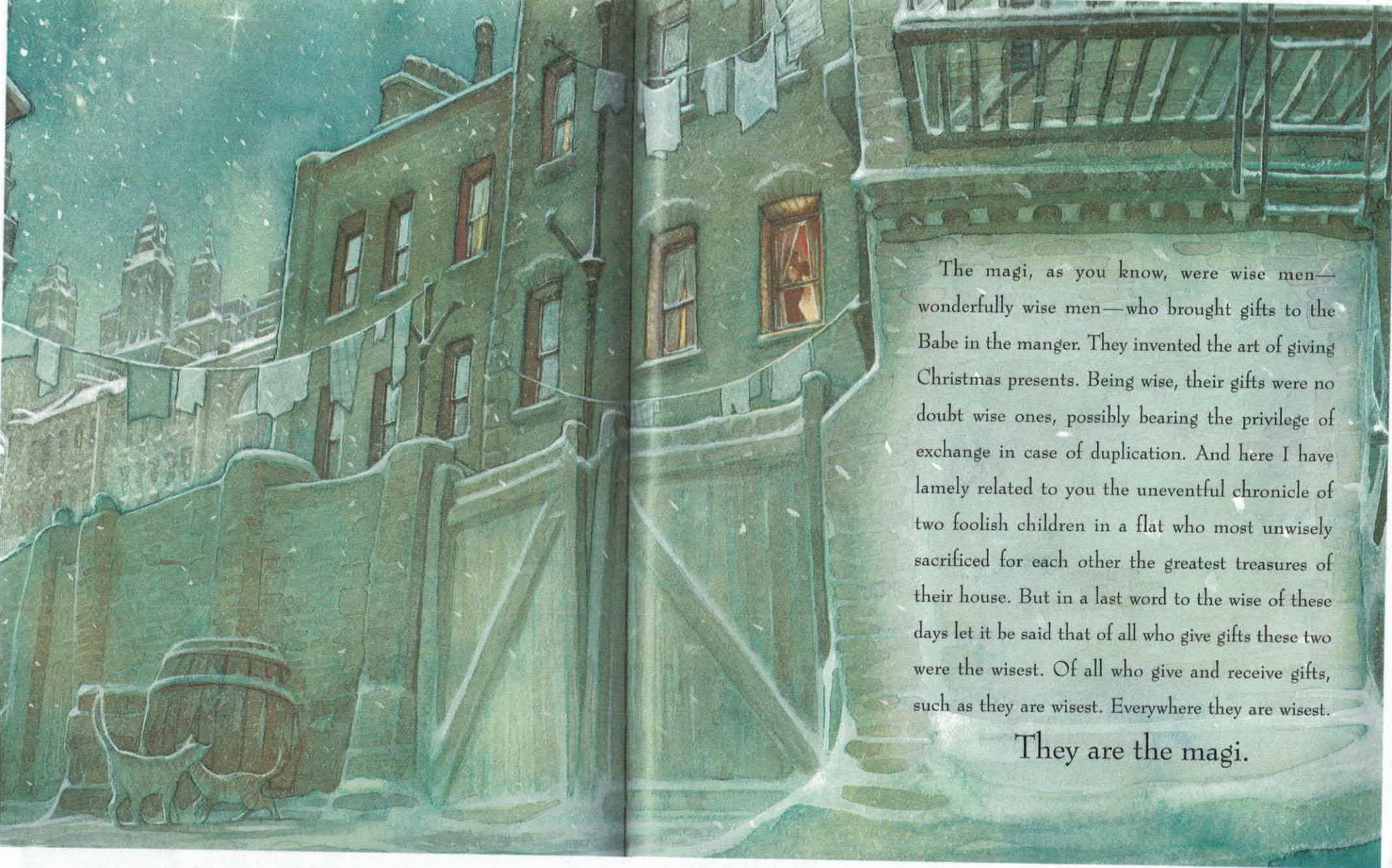
"Isn't it a dandy, Jim? I hunted all over town to find it. You'll have to look at the time a hundred times a day now. Give me your watch. I want to see how it looks on it."



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

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





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

They are the magi.

From *The Home Monthly*, VI (December 1896): 8-10.

The Burglar's Christmas.

Elizabeth L. Seymour.

TWO very shabby looking young men stood at the corner of Prairie avenue and Eightieth street, looking despondently at the carriages that whirled by. It was Christmas Eve, and the streets were full of vehicles; florists' wagons, grocers' carts and carriages. The streets were in that half-liquid, half-congealed condition peculiar to the streets of Chicago at that season of the year. The swift wheels that spun by sometimes threw the slush of mud and snow over the two young men who were talking on the corner.

"Well," remarked the elder of the two, "I guess we are at our rope's end, sure enough. How do you feel?"

"Pretty shaky. The wind's sharp to-night. If I had had anything to eat I mightn't mind it so much. There is simply no show. I'm sick of the whole business. Looks like there's nothing for it but the lake."

"O, nonsense, I thought you had more grit. Got anything left you can hoc?"

"Nothing but my beard, and I am afraid they wouldn't find it worth a pawn ticket," said the younger man ruefully, rubbing the week's growth of stubble on his face.

"Got any folks anywhere? Now's your time to strike 'em if you have."

"Never mind if I have, they're out of the question."

"Well, you'll be out of it before many hours if you don't make a move of some sort. A man's got to eat. See here, I am going down to Longtin's saloon. I used to play the banjo in there with a couple of coons, and I'll bone him for some of his free lunch stuff. You'd better come along, perhaps they'll fill an order for two."

"How far down is it?"

"Well, it's clear down town, of course, way down on Michigan avenue."

"Thanks, I guess I'll loaf around here. I don't feel equal to the walk, and the cars—well, the cars are crowded." His features drew themselves into what might have been a smile under happier circumstances.

"No, you never did like street cars, you're too aristocratic. See here, Crawford, I don't like leaving you here. You ain't good company for yourself to-night."

"Crawford? O, yes, that's the last one. There have been so many I forget them."

"Have you got a real name, anyway?"

"O, yes, but it's one of the ones I've forgotten. Don't you worry about me. You go along and get your free lunch. I think I had a row in Longtin's place once. I'd better not show myself there again." As he spoke the young man nodded and turned slowly up the avenue.

He was miserable enough to want to be quite alone. Even the crowd that jostled by him annoyed him. He wanted to think about himself. He had avoided this final reckoning with himself for a year now. He had laughed it off and drunk it off. But now, when all those artificial devices which are employed to turn our thoughts into other channels and shield us from ourselves had failed him, it must come. Hunger is a powerful incentive to introspection.

It is a tragic hour, that hour when we are finally driven to reckon with ourselves, when every avenue of mental distraction has been cut off and our own life and all its ineffaceable failures closes about us like the walls of that old torture chamber of the Inquisition. To-night, as this man stood stranded in the streets of the city, his hour came. It was not the first time he had been hungry and desperate and alone. But always before there had been some outlook, some chance ahead, some pleasure yet untasted that seemed worth the effort, some face that he fancied was, or would be, dear. But it was not so to-night. The unyielding conviction was upon him that he had failed in everything, had outlived everything. It had been near him for a long time, that Pale Spectre. He had caught its shadow at the bottom of his glass many a time, at the head of his bed when he was sleepless at night, in the twilight shadows when some great sunset broke upon him. It had made life hateful to him when he awoke in the morning before now. But now it settled slowly over him, like night, the endless Northern nights that bid the sun a long farewell. It rose up before him like granite. From this brilliant city with its glad bustle of Yule-tide he was shut off as completely as though he were a creature of another species. His days seemed numbered and done, sealed over like the little coral cells at the bottom of the sea. Involuntarily he drew that cold air through his lungs slowly, as though he were tasting it for the last time.

Yet he was but four and twenty, this man—he looked even younger—and he had a father some place down East who had been very proud of him once. Well, he had taken his life into his own hands, and this was what he had made of it. That was all there was to be said. He could remember the hopeful things they used to say

about him at college in the old days, before he had cut away and begun to live by his wits, and he found courage to smile at them now. They had read him wrongly. He knew now that he never had the essentials of success, only the superficial agility that is often mistaken for it. He was tow without the tinder, and he had burnt himself out at other people's fires. He had helped other people to make it win, but he himself—he had never touched an enterprise that had not failed eventually. Or, if it survived his connection with it, it left him behind.

His last venture had been with some ten-cent specialty company, a little lower than all the others, that had gone to pieces in Buffalo, and he had worked his way to Chicago by boat. When the boat made up its crew for the outward voyage, he was dispensed with as usual. He was used to that. The reason for it? O, there are so many reasons for failure! His was a very common one.

As he stood there in the wet under the street light he drew up his reckoning with the world and decided that it had treated him as well as he deserved. He had overdrawn his account once too often. There had been a day when he thought otherwise; when he had said he was unjustly handled, that his failure was merely the lack of proper adjustment between himself and other men, that some day he would be recognized and it would all come right. But he knew better than that now, and he was still man enough to bear no grudge against any one—man or woman.

To-night was his birthday, too. There seemed something particularly amusing in that. He turned up a limp little coat collar to try to keep a little of the wet chill from his throat, and instinctively began to remember all the birthday parties he used to have. He was so cold and empty that his mind seemed unable to grapple with any serious question. He kept thinking about ginger bread and frosted cakes like a child. He could remember the splendid birthday parties his mother used to give him, when all the other little boys in the block came in their Sunday clothes and creaking shoes, with their ears still red from their mother's towel, and the pink and white birthday cake, and the stuffed olives and all the dishes of which he had been particularly fond, and how he would eat and eat and then go to bed and dream of Santa Claus. And in the morning he would awaken and eat again, until by night the family doctor arrived with his castor oil, and poor William used to dolefully say that it was altogether too much to have your birthday and Christmas all at once. He could remember, too, the royal birthday suppers he had given at college, and the stag dinners, and the toasts, and the music, and the good fellows who had wished him happiness and really meant what they said.

And since then there were other birthday suppers that he could not remember so clearly; the memory of them was heavy and flat, like cigarette smoke that has been shut in a room all night, like champagne that has been a day opened, a song that has been too often sung, an acute sensation that has been overstrained. They seemed tawdry and garish, discordant to him now. He rather wished he could forget them altogether.

Whichever way his mind now turned there was one thought that it could not escape, and that was the idea of food. He caught the scent of a cigar suddenly, and felt a sharp pain in the pit of his abdomen and a sudden moisture in his mouth. His cold hands clenched angrily, and for a moment he felt that bitter hatred of wealth, of ease, of everything that is well-fed and well-housed that is common to starving men. At any rate he had a right to eat! He had demanded great things from the world once: fame and wealth and admiration. Now it was simply bread—and he would have it! He looked about him quickly and felt the blood begin to stir in his veins. In all his straits he had never stolen anything, his tastes were above it. But to-night there would be no to-morrow. He was amused at the way in which the idea excited him. Was it possible there was yet one more experience that would distract him, one thing that had power to excite his jaded interest? Good! he had failed at everything else, now he would see what his chances would be as a common thief. It would be amusing to watch the beautiful consistency of his destiny work itself out even in that role. It would be interesting to add another study to his gallery of futile attempts, and then label them all: "the failure as a journalist," "the failure as a lecturer," "the failure as a business man," "the failure as a thief," and so on, like the titles under the pictures of the Dance of Death. It was time that Childe Roland came to the dark tower.

A girl hastened by him with her arms full of packages. She walked quickly and nervously, keeping well within the shadow, as if she were not accustomed to carrying bundles and did not care to meet any of her friends. As she crossed the muddy street, she made an effort to lift her skirt a little, and as she did so one of the packages slipped unnoticed from beneath her arm. He caught it up and overtook her. "Excuse me, but I think you dropped something."

She started, "O, yes, thank you, I would rather have lost anything than that."

The young man turned angrily upon himself. The package must have contained something of value. Why had he not kept it? Was this the sort of thief he would make? He ground his teeth together. There is nothing more maddening than to have morally consented to crime and then lack the nerve force to carry it out.

A carriage drove up to the house before which he stood. Several richly dressed women alighted and went in. It was a new house, and must have been built since he was in Chicago last. The front door was open and he could see down the hall-way and up the stair case. The servant had left the door and gone with the guests. The first floor was brilliantly lighted, but the windows upstairs were dark. It looked very easy, just to slip upstairs to the darkened chambers where the jewels and trinkets of the fashionable occupants were kept.

Still burning with impatience against himself he entered quickly. Instinctively he removed his mud-stained hat as he passed quickly and quietly up the stair case. It struck him as being a rather superfluous courtesy in a burglar, but he had done it before he had thought. His way was clear enough, he met no one on the stairway or in the upper hall. The gas was lit in the upper hall. He passed the first chamber door through sheer cowardice. The second he entered quickly, thinking of something else lest his courage should fail him, and closed the door behind him. The light from the hall shone into the room through the transom. The apartment was furnished richly enough to justify his expectations. He went at once to the dressing case. A number of rings and small trinkets lay in a silver tray. These he put hastily in his pocket. He opened the upper drawer and found, as he expected, several leather cases. In the first he opened was a lady's watch, in the second a pair of old-fashioned bracelets; he seemed to dimly remember having seen bracelets like them before, somewhere. The third case was heavier, the spring was much worn, and it opened easily. It held a cup of some kind. He held it up to the light and then his strained nerves gave way and he uttered a sharp exclamation. It was the silver

mug he used to drink from when he was a little boy.

The door opened, and a woman stood in the doorway facing him. She was a tall



THE DOOR OPENED AND A WOMAN STOOD IN THE DOORWAY FACING HIM. SHE WAS A TALL WOMAN WITH WHITE HAIR IN EVENING DRESS.

woman, with white hair, in evening dress. The light from the hall streamed in upon him, but she was not afraid. She stood looking at him a moment, then she threw out her hand and went quickly toward him.

"Willie, Willie! Is it you!"

He struggled to loose her arms from him, to keep her lips from his cheek. "Mother—you must not! You do not understand! O, my God, this is worst of all!" Hunger, weakness, cold, shame, all came back to him, and shook his self-control completely. Physically he was too weak to stand a shock like this. Why could it not have been an ordinary discovery, arrest, the station house and all the rest of it. Anything but this! A hard dry sob broke from him. Again he strove to disengage himself.

"Who is it says I shall not kiss my son? O, my boy, we have waited so long for this! You have been so long in coming, even I almost gave you up."

Her lips upon his cheek burnt him like fire. He put his hand to his throat, and spoke thickly and incoherently: "You do not understand. I did not know you were here. I came here to rob—it is the first time—I swear it—but I am a common thief. My pockets are full of your jewels now. Can't you hear me? I am a common thief!"

"Hush, my boy, those are ugly words. How could you rob your own house? How could you take what is your own? They are all yours, my son, as wholly yours as my great love—and you can't doubt that, Will, do you?"

That soft voice, the warmth and fragrance of her person stole through his chill, empty veins like a gentle stimulant. He felt as though all his strength were leaving him and even consciousness. He held fast to her and bowed his head on her strong shoulder, and groaned aloud.

"O, mother, life is hard, hard!"

She said nothing, but held him closer. And O, the strength of those white arms that held him! O, the assurance of safety in that warm bosom that rose and fell under his cheek! For a moment they stood so, silently. Then they heard a heavy step upon the stair. She led him to a chair and went out and closed the door. At the top of the staircase she met a tall, broad-shouldered man, with iron gray hair, and a face alert and stern. Her eyes were shining and her cheeks on fire, her whole face was one expression of intense determination.

"James, it is William in there, come home. You must keep him at any cost. If he goes this time, I go with him. O, James, be easy with him, he has suffered so." She broke from a command to an entreaty, and laid her hand on his shoulder. He looked questioningly at her a moment, then went in the room and quietly shut the door.

She stood leaning against the wall, clasping her temples with her hands and listening to the low indistinct sound of the voices within. Her own lips moved silently. She waited a long time, scarcely breathing. At last the door opened, and her husband came out. He stopped to say in a shaken voice,

"You go to him now, he will stay. I will go to my room. I will see him again in the morning."

She put her arm about his neck, "O, James, I thank you, I thank you! This is the night he came so long ago, you remember? I gave him to you then, and now you give him back to me!"

"Don't, Helen," he muttered. "He is my son, I have never forgotten that. I failed with him. I don't like to fail, it cuts my pride. Take him and make a man of him." He passed on down the hall.

She flew into the room where the young man sat with his head bowed upon his knee. She dropped upon her knees beside him. Ah, it was so good to him to feel those arms again!

"He is so glad, Willie, so glad! He may not show it, but he is as happy as I. He never was demonstrative with either of us, you know."

"O, my God, he was good enough," groaned the man. "I told him everything, and he was good enough. I don't see how either of you can look at me, speak to me, touch me." He shivered under her clasp again as when she had first touched him, and tried weakly to throw her off.

But she whispered softly,

"This is my right, my son."

Presently, when he was calmer, she rose. "Now, come with me into the library, and I will have your dinner brought there."

As they went down stairs she remarked apologetically, "I will not call Ellen to-night; she has a number of guests to attend to. She is a big girl now, you know, and came out last winter. Besides, I want you all to myself to-night."

When the dinner came, and it came very soon, he fell upon it savagely. As he ate she told him all that had transpired during the years of his absence, and how his father's business had brought them there. "I was glad when we came. I thought you would drift West. I seemed a good deal nearer to you here."

There was a gentle unobtrusive sadness in her tone that was too soft for a reproach.

"Have you everything you want? It is a comfort to see you eat."

He smiled grimly, "It is certainly a comfort to me. I have not indulged in this frivolous habit for some thirty-five hours."

She caught his hand and pressed it sharply, uttering a quick remonstrance.

"Don't say that! I know, but I can't hear you say it,—it's too terrible! My boy, food has choked me many a time when I have thought of the possibility of that. Now take the old lounging chair by the fire, and if you are too tired to talk, we will just sit and rest together."

He sank into the depths of the big leather chair with the lion's heads on the arms, where he had sat so often in the days when his feet did not touch the floor and he was half afraid of the grim monsters cut in the polished wood. That chair seemed to speak to him of things long forgotten. It was like the touch of an old familiar friend. He felt a sudden yearning tenderness for the happy little boy who had sat there and dreamed of the big world so long ago. Alas, he had been dead many a summer, that little boy!

He sat looking up at the magnificent woman beside him. He had almost forgotten how handsome she was; how lustrous and sad were the eyes that were set under that serene brow, how impetuous and wayward the mouth even now, how superb the white throat and shoulders! Ah, the wit and grace and fineness of this woman! He remembered how proud he had been of her as a boy when she came to see him at school. Then in the deep red coals of the grate he saw the faces of other women who had come since then into his vexed, disordered life. Laughing faces, with eyes artificially bright, eyes without depth or meaning, features without the stamp of high sensibilities. And he had left this face for such as those!

He sighed restlessly and laid his hand on hers. There seemed refuge and protection in the touch of her, as in the old days when he was afraid of the dark. He had been in the dark so long now, his confidence was so thoroughly shaken, and he was bitterly afraid of the night and of himself.

"Ah, mother, you make other things seem so false. You must feel that I owe you an explanation, but I can't make any, even to myself. Ah, but we make poor exchanges in life. I can't make out the riddle of it all. Yet there are things I ought to tell you before I accept your confidence like this."

"I'd rather you wouldn't, Will. Listen: Between you and me there can be no secrets. We are more alike than other people. Dear boy, I know all about it. I am a woman, and circumstances were different with me, but we are of one blood. I have lived all your life before you. You have never had an impulse that I have not known, you have never touched a brink that my feet have not trod. This is your birthday night. Twenty-four years ago I foresaw all this. I was a young woman then and I had hot battles of my own, and I felt your likeness to me. You were not like other babies. From the hour you were born you were restless and discontented, as I

had been before you. You used to brace your strong little limbs against mine and try to throw me off as you did to-night. To-night you have come back to me, just as you always did after you ran away to swim in the river that was forbidden you, the river you loved because it was forbidden. You are tired and sleepy, just as you used to be then, only a little older and a little paler and a little more foolish. I never asked you where you had been then, nor will I now. You have come back to me, that's all in all to me. I know your every possibility and limitation, as a composer knows his instrument."

He found no answer that was worthy to give to talk like this. He had not found life easy since he had lived by his wits. He had come to know poverty at close quarters. He had known what it was to be gay with an empty pocket, to wear violets in his button hole when he had not breakfasted, and all the hateful shams of the poverty of idleness. He had been a reporter on a big metropolitan daily, where men grind out their brains on paper until they have not one idea left—and still grind on. He had worked in a real estate office, where ignorant men were swindled. He had sung in a comic opera chorus and played *Harris* in an Uncle Tom's Cabin Company, and edited a Socialist weekly. He had been dogged by debt and hunger and grinding poverty, until to sit here by a warm fire without concern as to how it would be paid for seemed unnatural.

He looked up at her questioningly. "I wonder if you know how much you pardon?"

"O, my poor boy, much or little, what does it matter? Have you wandered so far and paid such a bitter price for knowledge and not yet learned that love has nothing to do with pardon or forgiveness, that it only loves, and loves—and loves? They have not taught you well, the women of your world." She leaned over and kissed him, as no woman had kissed him since he left her.

He drew a long sigh of rich content. The old life, with all its bitterness and useless antagonism and flimsy sophistries, its brief delights that were always tinged with fear and distrust and unfaith, that whole miserable, futile, swindled world of Bohemia seemed immeasurably distant and far away, like a dream that is over and done. And as the chimes rang joyfully outside and sleep pressed heavily upon his eyelids, he wondered dimly if the Author of this sad little riddle of ours were not able to solve it after all, and if the Potter would not finally mete out his all comprehensive justice, such as none but he could have, to his Things of Clay, which are made in his own patterns, weak or strong, for his own ends; and if some day we will not awaken and find that all evil is a dream, a mental distortion that will pass when the dawn shall break.

Twice Twenty-two

THE GOLDEN APPLES OF THE SUN
A MEDICINE FOR MELANCHOLY

by Ray Bradbury

DRAWINGS BY JOE MUGNAINI

Doubleday & Company, Inc., Garden City, New York

THE GIFT

Tomorrow would be Christmas, and even while the three of them rode to the rocket port the mother and father were worried. It was the boy's first flight into space, his very first time in a rocket, and they wanted everything to be perfect. So when, at the custom's table, they were forced to leave behind his gift which exceeded the weight limit by no more than a few ounces and the little tree with the lovely white candles, they felt themselves deprived of the season and their love.

The boy was waiting for them in the Terminal room. Walking toward him, after their unsuccessful clash with the Interplanetary officials, the mother and father whispered to each other.

"What shall we do?"

"Nothing, nothing. What *can* we do?"

"Silly rules!"

"And he so wanted the tree!"

The siren gave a great howl and people pressed forward into the Mars Rocket. The mother and father walked at the very last, their small pale son between them, silent.

"I'll think of something," said the father.

"What . . . ?" asked the boy.

And the rocket took off and they were flung headlong into dark space.

The rocket moved and left fire behind and left Earth behind on which the date was December 24, 2052, heading out into a place where there was no time at all, no month, no year, no hour. They slept away the rest of the first "day." Near midnight, by their Earth-time New York watches, the boy awoke and said, "I want to go look out the porthole."

There was only one port, a "window" of immensely thick glass of some size, up on the next deck.

"Not quite yet," said the father. "I'll take you up later."

"I want to see where we are and where we're going."

"I want you to wait for a reason," said the father.

He had been lying awake, turning this way and that, thinking of the abandoned gift, the problem of the season, the lost tree and the white candles. And at last, sitting up, no more than five minutes ago, he believed he had found a plan. He need only carry it out and this journey would be fine and joyous indeed.

"Son," he said, "in exactly one half hour it will be Christmas."

"Oh," said the mother, dismayed that he had mentioned it. Somehow she had rather hoped that the boy would forget.

The boy's face grew feverish and his lips trembled. "I know, I know. Will I get a present, will I? Will I have a tree? You promised—"

"Yes, yes, all that, and more," said the father.

The mother started. "But—"

"I mean it," said the father. "I really mean it. All and more, much more. Excuse me, now. I'll be back."

He left them for about twenty minutes. When he came back he was smiling. "Almost time."

"Can I hold your watch?" asked the boy, and the watch was handed over and he held it ticking in his fingers as the rest of the hour drifted by in fire and silence and unfelt motion.

"It's Christmas *now!* Christmas! Where's my present?"

"Here we go," said the father and took his boy by the shoulder

and led him from the room, down the hall, up a rampway, his wife following.

"I don't understand," she kept saying.

"You will. Here we are," said the father.

They had stopped at the closed door of a large cabin. The father tapped three times and then twice in a code. The door opened and the light in the cabin went out and there was a whisper of voices.

"Go on in, son," said the father.

"It's dark."

"I'll hold your hand. Come on, Mama."

They stepped into the room and the door shut, and the room was very dark indeed. And before them loomed a great glass eye, the porthole, a window four feet high and six feet wide, from which they could look out into space.

The boy gasped.

Behind him, the father and the mother gasped with him, and then in the dark room some people began to sing.

"Merry Christmas, son," said the father.

And the voices in the room sang the old, the familiar carols, and the boy moved forward slowly until his face was pressed against the cool glass of the port. And he stood there for a long long time, just looking and looking out into space and the deep night at the burning and the burning of ten billion billion white and lovely candles. . . .

Other books by Shirley Jackson

THE ROAD THROUGH THE WALL
THE LOTTERY; AND OTHER STORIES
HANGSAMAN
LIFE AMONG THE SAVAGES
THE BIRD'S NEST
RAISING DEMONS
THE SUNDIAL
THE HAUNTING OF HILL HOUSE
WE HAVE ALWAYS LIVED IN THE CASTLE
THE MAGIC OF SHIRLEY JACKSON
COME ALONG WITH ME

JUST AN
ORDINARY DAY



Shirley Jackson

*Edited by Laurence Jackson Hyman
and Sarah Hyman Stewart*



BANTAM BOOKS

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the telephone company
 urrying unpaid bills, and
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DECK THE HALLS



IT WAS EIGHT O'CLOCK in the evening, Christmas Eve, and Mr. and Mrs. Williams were decorating their Christmas tree. It was the first Christmas tree they had had since they were married, but this year their little girl was two years old, and Mrs. Williams had thought that it was time they started making a real Christmas for her to remember when she grew up. Mrs. Williams had bought some ornaments at the five and ten, and a lot of little toys to hang on the tree, and Mr. Williams had brought out a kitchen chair and was standing on it, hanging things on the top branches. All of the baby's relatives and friends had sent lovely things, which Mrs. Williams intended to pile lavishly under the tree, and Mr. and Mrs. Williams had bought an enormous teddy bear, taller by a head than the baby herself, which would be the first thing she would see in the morning.

When the tree was finished, with the packages and the teddy bear underneath, Mrs. Williams stood back and looked at it, holding her breath with pleasure. "Bob," she said, "it looks lovely. Like a *dream* of Christmas."

Mr. Williams eased himself off the chair gingerly. "Looks good," he admitted.

Mrs. Williams went over and moved an ornament to a higher branch. "She'll come running into the room and we'll have it all lighted up," she

said happily, "and it will be something for her to remember all year round."

"We used to have fine Christmases when I was a kid," Mr. Williams said, "all the family together, and a turkey and everything."

The doorbell rang, and Mrs. Williams went to open it. "I could only get a goose for tomorrow," she said over her shoulder, "not many turkeys this year." When she opened the door there were two little girls standing on the porch, snow in their hair and on their shoulders, and both looking up at her. The taller of the two was holding a folded piece of paper, which she held out to Mrs. Williams.

"My mother said to give you this," she said to Mrs. Williams.

Mrs. Williams frowned, puzzled, looking down at the children, wondering if they lived in the neighborhood. "Come in," she said, "don't stand out there in the cold." She closed the door behind the little girls, and they stood expectantly in the hall, their eyes on the Christmas tree beyond the archway into the living room. Mrs. Williams, still puzzled, opened the paper and started to read it aloud.

"Dear neighbor," she read, "these are my two little girls. The oldest is eight years of age and the little one is five . . ." Mrs. Williams suddenly stopped reading aloud and shut her lips tight, reading on to herself: "If you do not want to give them anything please don't bother, but if you do Jeanie wears a size four shoe children's size and Helen needs something to wear to school this winter. Even if you do not give them anything, a Merry Christmas." Mrs. Williams finished reading and looked at the children for a minute. "Bob," she said.

Mr. Williams came out from the living room, and Mrs. Williams handed him the note and turned again to the children. "You sit down there for a minute," she said, indicating the leather bench in the hall, "and I'm going to get you something hot to drink to warm you up, and then we'll see what we can do about this letter of your mother's." She turned to the littler child. "You're Jeanie?" The girl nodded solemnly. "Well, you just let me take your muffler off and sit you up here on this bench, and then we'll have some lovely hot cocoa . . ." While she talked, Mrs. Williams had put the little girl on the bench and taken off her coat, and the older girl, watching, finally took off her coat and sat beside her sister. Mrs. Williams turned around to Mr. Williams, who was standing helplessly, holding the letter. "You amuse these youngsters," she said, "while I run out and make some cocoa."

The children sat on the bench looking at the Christmas tree, and Mr. Williams squatted on the floor beside them. "Well," he said, "you're a little bigger than my little girl, so I hardly know what to say to you . . ."

Mrs. Williams went out into the kitchen and put some milk on to heat while she arranged a dish of oatmeal cookies and two cups and saucers on a tray. When she had made the cocoa, she put the pot on the tray and

carried it out into the hall. and the older girl was watching them a story and Mrs. Williams quick ending on it and stood filled it with cocoa, and the you nice and warm," she said.

Mrs. Williams went back brought them out and filled floor drinking, and Mr. Williams so that she could hardly hold Mrs. Williams went upstairs couple of sweaters and a warm the children could carry them and scribbled on it: "I have you can use these. Or you come with the clothes and came back to talk to Mr. Williams.

"The second grade," the

"Well, isn't that fine,"

than Helen, though," he said

"I'm smarter than her,"

The smaller girl giggled she said.

When Mrs. Williams came and turned away from the dollar bill, and held it up to went over and slipped it into now," he said. "Tell your mother you."

"Can they carry the sweater older girl slipped off the bench coat in it, it wasn't very heavy Williams thought. Mrs. Williams bench and began putting her

"Thank you very much

"Nonsense," Mr. Williams older girl smiled and reached

"Wait a minute," Mrs. Williams and took off a couple of sweaters children.

They accepted them silently her sister's hand and pointed

The older girl looked up

her to remember all year

"I was a kid," Mr. Williams said everything."

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he said to Mrs. Williams.

He sat down at the children, won't come in," she said, "don't go in front of or behind the little girls, and don't touch the Christmas tree beyond the lights. Mrs. Williams, still puzzled, opened the

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the living room, and Mrs. Williams turned to the children. "You sit down there on the bench in the hall, "and I'll warm you up, and then we'll have some mother's." She turned to the oldest solemnly. "Well, you just let me sit on this bench, and then we'll have some talked, Mrs. Williams had taken her coat, and the older girl, sitting beside her sister. Mrs. Williams was standing helplessly, holding the oldest, "while I run out and make

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and put some milk on to heat and two cups and saucers on a tray and put the pot on the tray and

carried it out into the hall. The little girl was laughing at Mr. Williams, and the older girl was watching with a smile. Mr. Williams was telling them a story and Mrs. Williams waited with the cocoa while he put a quick ending on it and stood up. She handed each little girl a cup and filled it with cocoa, and then gave them each a cookie. "That will make you nice and warm," she said. "Believe I'll have some, too," Mr. Williams said.

Mrs. Williams went back into the kitchen and got two more cups, and brought them out and filled them, and she and Mr. Williams sat on the floor drinking, and Mr. Williams made faces that made little Jeanie laugh so that she could hardly hold her cup. When she had finished her cocoa, Mrs. Williams went upstairs and got out an old coat of her own, and a couple of sweaters and a warm bathrobe. She put them in an old suitcase so the children could carry them, and tore off a page from the telephone pad and scribbled on it: "I have nothing that will fit the children, but maybe you can use these. Or you can make them over." She slipped the note in with the clothes and came back downstairs to the children, who had begun to talk to Mr. Williams.

"The second grade," the older one was saying shyly.

"Well, isn't that fine," Mr. Williams said. "I bet you're lots smarter than Helen, though," he said to the smaller girl.

"I'm smarter than *her*," Helen said.

The smaller girl giggled. "Old Helen has to go to school every day," she said.

When Mrs. Williams came back into the hall, Mr. Williams stood up and turned away from the children. He took out his wallet, selected a five-dollar bill, and held it up to Mrs. Williams, who nodded. Mr. Williams went over and slipped it into the older girl's hand. "Don't you lose that, now," he said. "Tell your mother that's for a Christmas present for all of you."

"Can they carry the suitcase?" Mrs. Williams asked anxiously. The older girl slipped off the bench and picked up the suitcase. Even with the coat in it, it wasn't very heavy, and she would manage it all right, Mrs. Williams thought. Mrs. Williams helped the smaller girl down off the bench and began putting her coat on again.

"Thank you very much," the older girl said to Mr. Williams.

"Nonsense," Mr. Williams said, "it's Christmastime, isn't it?" The older girl smiled and reached for the suitcase.

"Wait a minute," Mrs. Williams said. She ran in to the Christmas tree and took off a couple of candy canes, and brought them back to the children.

They accepted them silently, but suddenly Jeanie began to cry, taking her sister's hand and pointing.

The older girl looked up apologetically. "It's the teddy bear," she said.

"She just saw it this minute and she's always wanted one." She tried to pull her sister to the front door, but the little girl refused to move, standing and crying.

"Poor little kid," Mr. Williams said. Mrs. Williams kneeled down beside the little girl.

"Jeanie, honey," she said, "just listen to me for a minute. The teddy bear is pretty, but it's for *my* little girl," she finished.

Jeanie stopped crying, looking up at Mrs. Williams. "Wait," Mrs. Williams said. She went back to the Christmas tree, Jeanie watching her eagerly, and took two little toys off the branches. It spoiled the whole balance of the tree, having them gone, but Mrs. Williams thought quickly that she could fix that later. One of the toys was a little doll, and the other was a folded piece of blanket with three very tiny dolls in it. Mrs. Williams gave the three tiny dolls to Jeanie and the larger doll to Helen. "These are for you," she said. Jeanie held the blanket with the little dolls, looking beyond Mrs. Williams at the teddy bear.

"Thank you very much," Helen said. "We better be going." She hesitated, and finally said to Mrs. Williams, "Please may I have the piece of paper back now?"

Mr. Williams handed her the folded note and Helen put it in her pocket and took Jeanie's hand.

"Merry Christmas," she said. She picked up the suitcase in her free hand and led Jeanie to the door, which Mr. Williams opened for her. On the porch she stopped again, and turned around. "We're going to sing a Christmas carol for you," she said, "I learned it in school." She began, and after a minute Jeanie joined in weakly: "Deck the hall with boughs of holly, tra la la la . . ."

Mr. and Mrs. Williams stood on the porch and watched them going down the walk, singing carefully together. When they reached the street Mr. Williams stepped back inside. "Coming?" he asked.

"Merry Christmas," Mrs. Williams called out after the children, but even to her, her voice sounded inadequate.

LORD OF

IT WAS A BLACK winter I stood, fifteen years old I villagers who crowded around scaffold and take his last look loved.

In that ignorant little vill and not even the lord in the to stand against the law of su today before the hatred in the death.

As I stood there, alone, I and I could almost hear th young one"—"Yonder goes t hated them all for their igno father out to walk the steps him before he mounted the haunted by the sight of thing stood as straight as I could, unjustly accused, Father, an hand."

But he looked at me, an

A CHILD'S CHRISTMAS IN WALES

Dylan Thomas

illustrated by

Trina Schart Hyman

Holiday House / New York



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Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Thomas, Dylan, 1914-1953.

A child's Christmas in Wales.

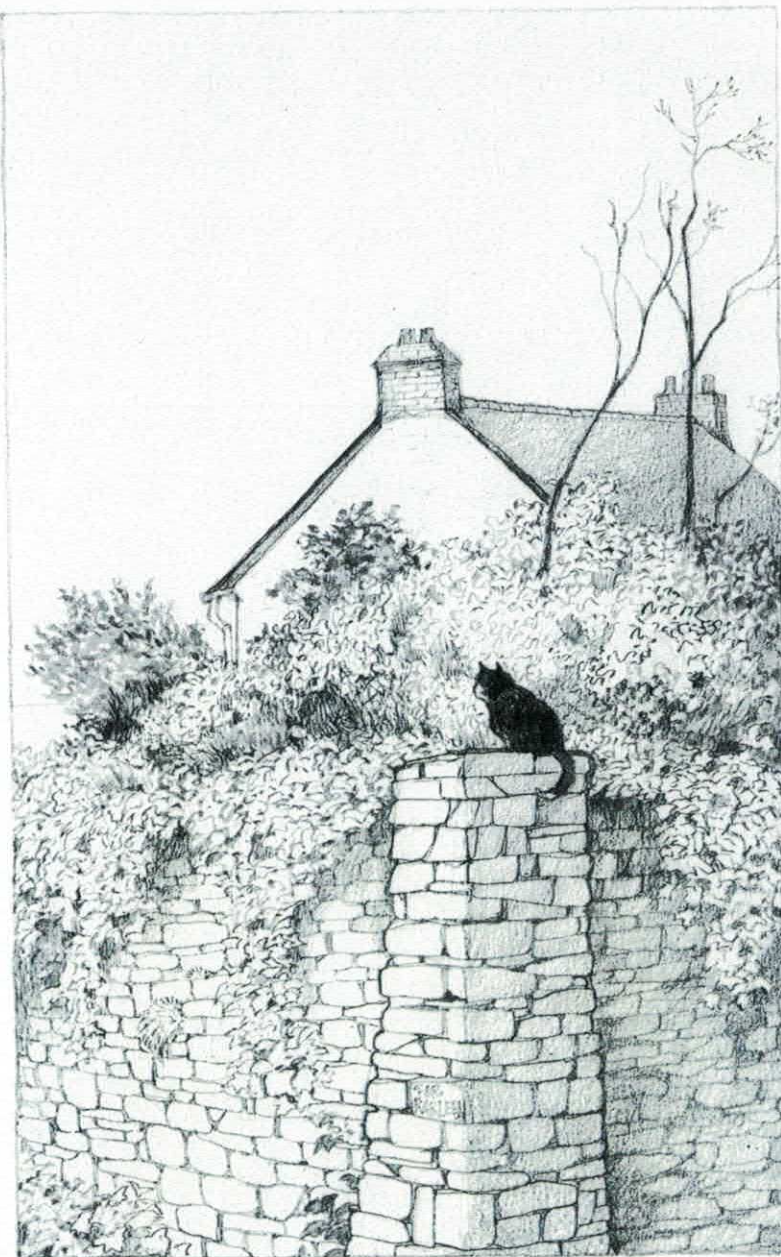
SUMMARY: A Welsh poet recalls the celebration of Christmas in Wales and the feelings it evoked in him as a child.

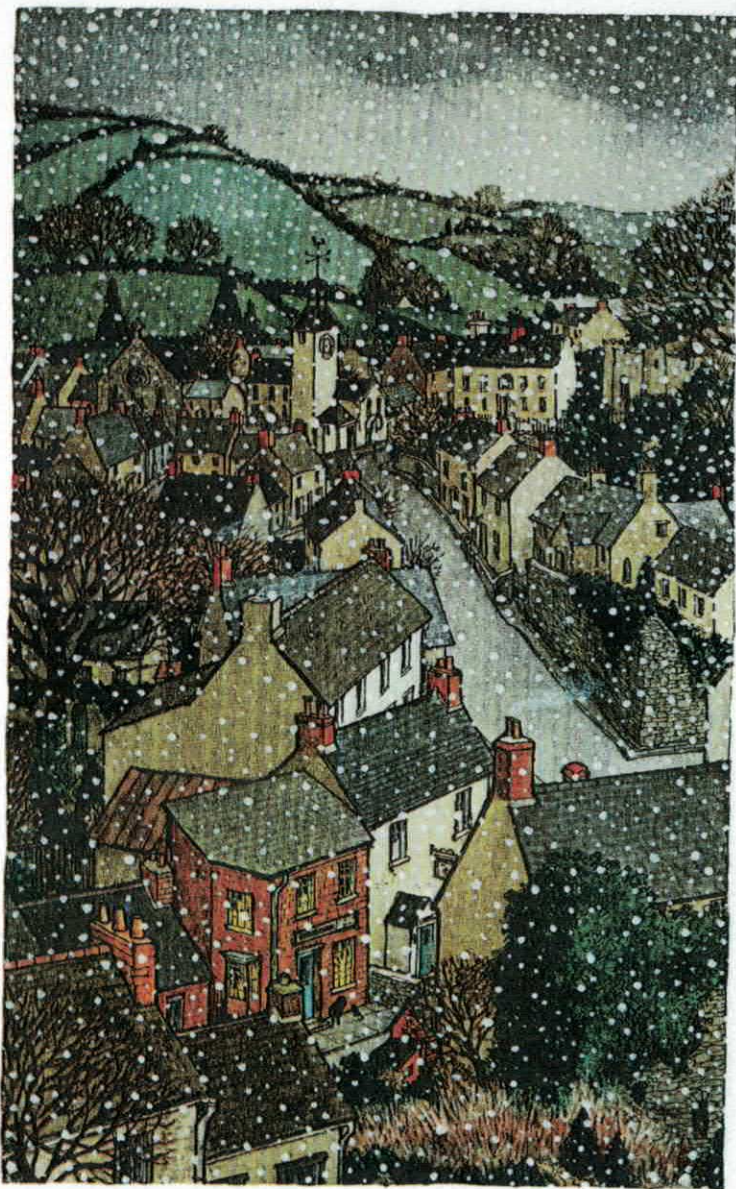
[1. Christmas—Fiction. 2. Wales—Fiction] I. Hyman,

Trina Schart, ill. II. Title.

PR6039.H52C48 1985 823'.912 85-766

ISBN 0-8234-0565-6





One Christmas was so much like another, in those years around the sea-town corner now and out of all sound except the distant speaking of the voices I sometimes hear a moment before sleep, that I can never remember whether it snowed for six days and six nights when I was twelve or whether it snowed for twelve days and twelve nights when I was six. All the Christmases roll down toward the two-tongued sea, like a cold and headlong moon bundling down the sky that was our street; and they stop at the rim of the ice-edged, fish-freezing waves, and I plunge my hands in the snow and bring out whatever I can find. In goes my hand into that wool-white bell-tongued ball of holidays resting at the rim of the carol-singing sea, and out come Mrs. Prothero and the firemen.



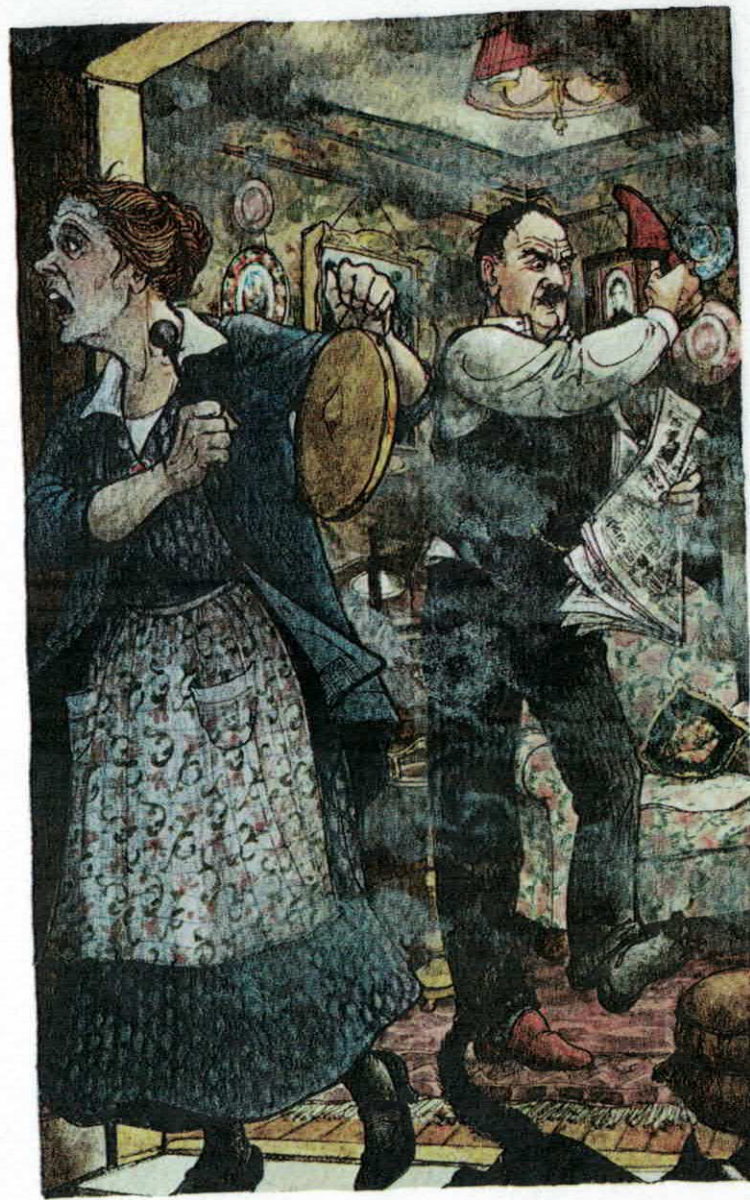
It was on the afternoon of the day of Christmas Eve, and I was in Mrs. Prothero's garden, waiting for cats, with her son Jim. It was snowing. It was always snowing at Christmas. December, in my memory, is white as Lapland, though there were no reindeers. But there were cats. Patient, cold and callous, our hands wrapped in socks, we waited to snowball the cats. Sleek and long as jaguars and horrible-whiskered, spitting and snarling, they would slink and sidle over the white back-garden walls, and the lynx-eyed hunters, Jim and I, fur-capped and moccasined trappers from Hudson

Bay, off Mumbles Road, would hurl our deadly snowballs at the green of their eyes.

The wise cats never appeared. We were so still, Eskimo-footed arctic marksmen in the muffling silence of the eternal snows—eternal, ever since Wednesday—that we never heard Mrs. Prothero's first cry from her igloo at the bottom of the garden. Or, if we heard it at all, it was, to us, like the far-off challenge of our enemy and prey, the neighbour's polar cat. But soon the voice grew louder. "Fire!" cried Mrs. Prothero, and she beat the dinner-gong.



And we ran down the garden, with the snowballs in our arms, toward the house; and smoke, indeed, was pouring out of the dining-room, and the gong was bombilating, and Mrs. Prothero was announcing ruin like a town crier in Pompeii. This was better than all the cats in Wales standing on the wall in a row. We bounded into the house, laden with snowballs, and stopped at the open door of the smoke-filled room. Something was burning all right; perhaps it was Mr. Prothero, who always slept there after midday dinner with a newspaper over his face. But he was standing in the middle of the room, saying, "A fine Christmas!" and smacking at the smoke with a slipper.





"Call the fire brigade," cried Mrs. Prothero as she beat the gong.

"They won't be there," said Mr. Prothero, "it's Christmas."

There was no fire to be seen, only clouds of smoke and Mr. Prothero standing in the middle of them, waving his slipper as though he were conducting.

"Do something," he said.

And we threw all our snowballs into the smoke—I think we missed Mr. Prothero—and ran out of the house to the telephone box.

"Let's call the police as well," Jim said.

"And the ambulance."

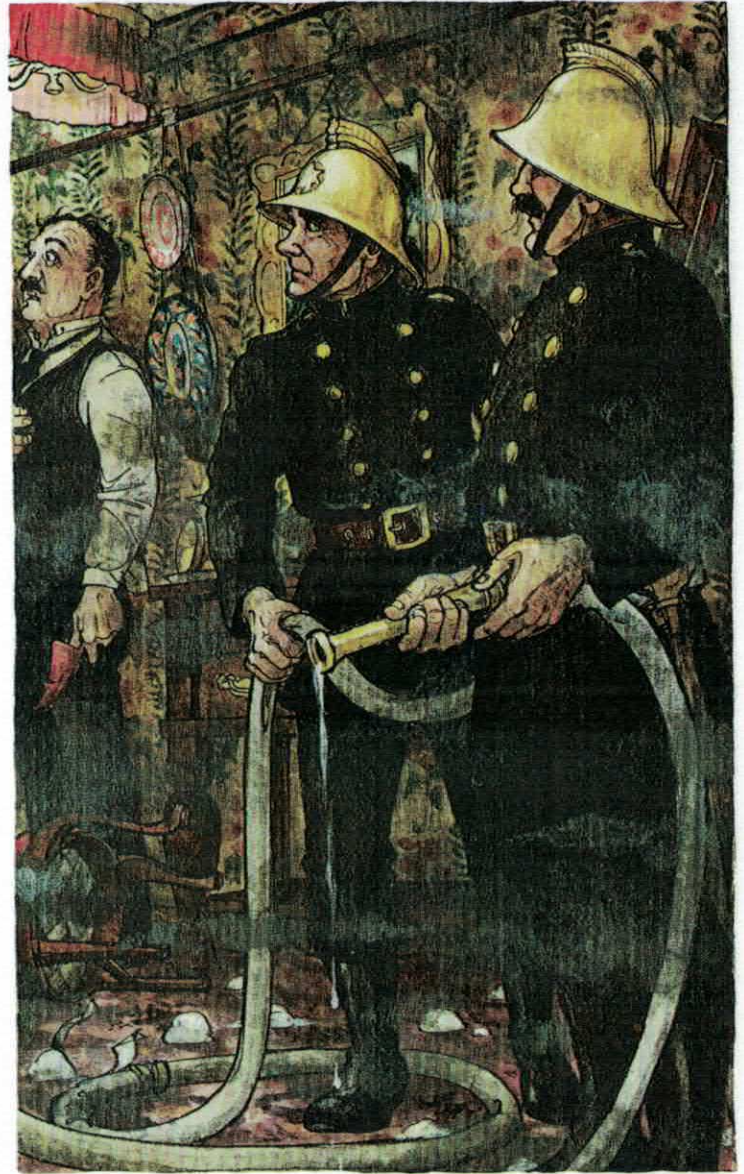
"And Ernie Jenkins, he likes fires."

But we only called the fire brigade, and soon the fire engine came and three tall men in helmets brought a hose into the house and Mr. Prothero got out just in time before they turned it on. Nobody could have had a noisier Christmas Eve. And when the firemen turned off the hose and were standing in the wet, smoky room, Jim's aunt, Miss Prothero, came downstairs and peered in at them. Jim and I waited, very quietly, to hear what she would say to them.





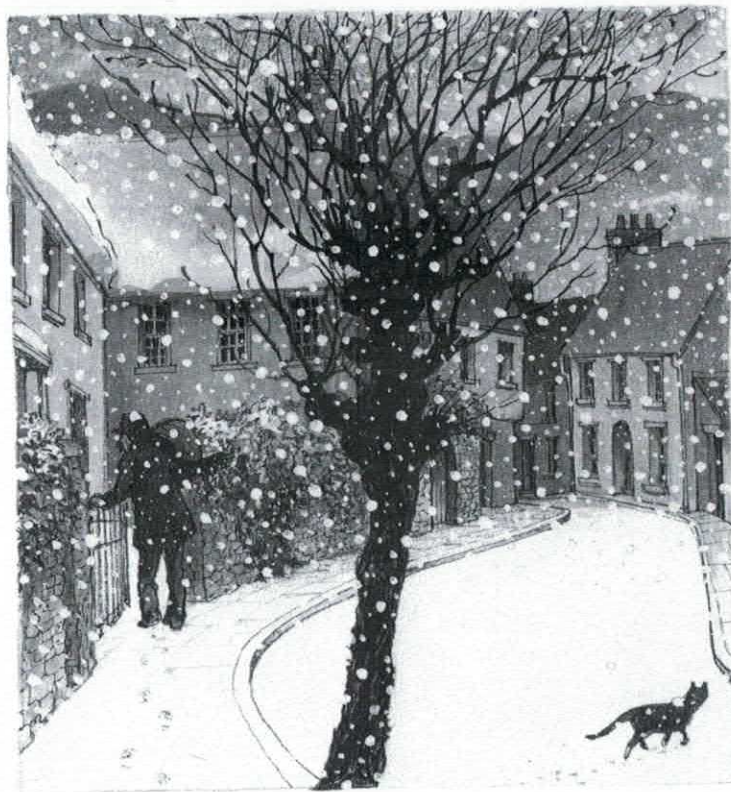
She said the right thing, always. She looked at the three tall firemen in their shining helmets, standing among the smoke and cinders and dissolving snowballs, and she said: "Would you like anything to read?"





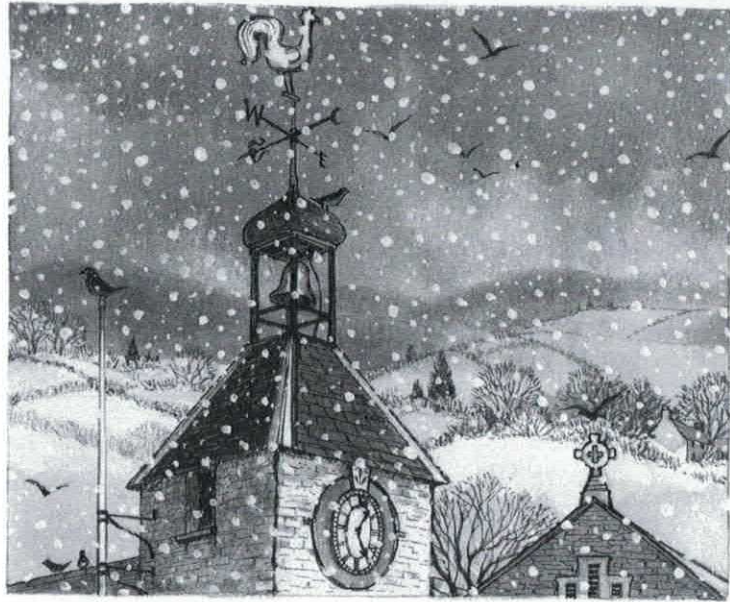
Years and years and years ago, when I was a boy, when there were wolves in Wales, and birds the color of red-flannel petticoats whisked past the harp-shaped hills, when we sang and wallowed all night and day in caves that smelt like Sunday afternoons in damp front farmhouse parlors, and we chased, with the jawbones of deacons, the English and the bears, before the motor car, before the wheel, before the duchess-faced horse, when we rode the daft and happy hills bareback, it snowed and it snowed. But here a small boy says: "It snowed last year, too. I made a snowman and my brother knocked it down and I knocked my brother down and then we had tea."

"But that was not the same snow," I say. "Our snow was not only shaken from whitewash buckets down the sky, it came shawling out of the ground and swam and drifted out of the arms and hands and bodies of the trees; snow grew overnight on the roofs of the houses like a pure and grandfather moss, minutely white-ivied the walls and settled on the postman, opening the gate, like a dumb, numb thunderstorm of white, torn Christmas cards."





“Were there postmen then, too?”
“With sprinkling eyes and wind-cherried noses,
on spread, frozen feet they crunched up to the doors
and mittened on them manfully. But all that the
children could hear was a ringing of bells.”



“You mean that the postman went rat-a-tat-tat and the doors rang?”

“I mean that the bells that the children could hear were inside them.”

“I only hear thunder sometimes, never bells.”

“There were church bells, too.”

“Inside them?”

“No, no, no, in the bat-black, snow-white bellies, tugged by bishops and storks. And they rang their tidings over the bandaged town, over the frozen foam of the powder and ice-cream hills, over the crackling sea. It seemed that all the churches boomed for joy under my window; and the weathercocks crew for Christmas, on our fence.”

“Get back to the postmen.”

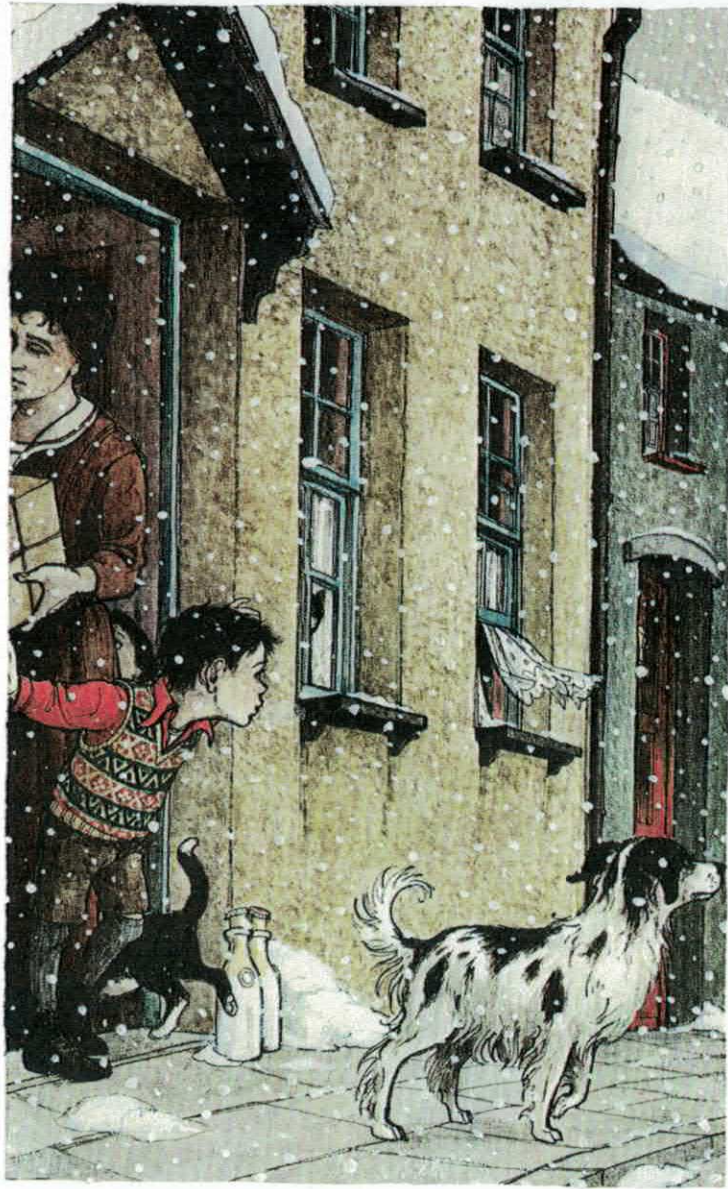
“They were just ordinary postmen, fond of walking and dogs and Christmas and the snow. They knocked on the doors with blue knuckles. . . .”

“Ours has got a black knocker. . . .”

“And then they stood on the white Welcome mat in the little, drifted porches and huffed and puffed, making ghosts with their breath, and jogged from foot to foot like small boys wanting to go out.”

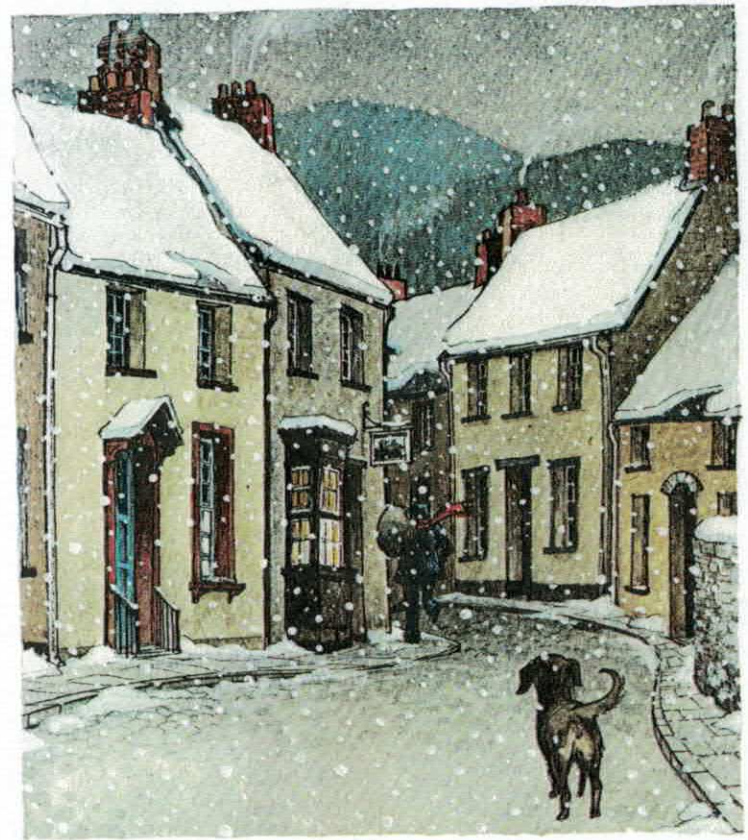
“And then the presents?”





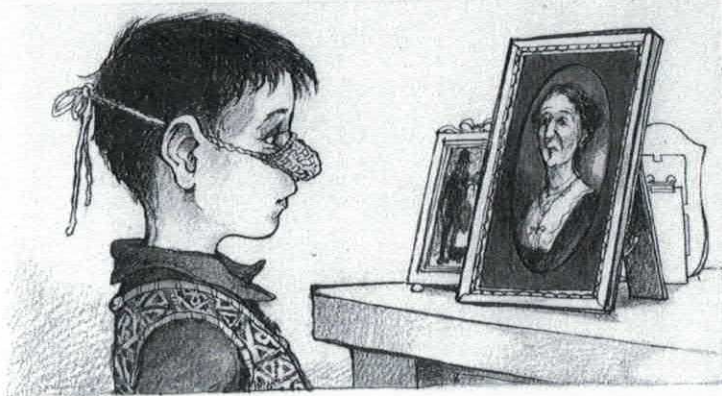
“And then the Presents, after the Christmas box. And the cold postman, with a rose on his button-nose, tingled down the tea-tray-slithered run of the chilly glinting hill. He went in his ice-bound boots like a man on fishmonger’s slabs.

He wagged his bag like a frozen camel’s hump, dizzily turned the corner on one foot, and, by God, he was gone.”



“Get back to the Presents.”

“There were the Useful Presents: engulfing mufflers of the old coach days, and mittens made for giant sloths; zebra scarfs of a substance like silky gum that could be tug-o’-warred down to the galoshes; blinding tam-o’-shanters like patchwork tea cozies and bunny-suited bushbies and balaclavas for victims of head-shrinking tribes; from aunts who always wore wool next to the skin there were mustached and rasping vests that made you wonder why the aunts had any skin left at all; and once I



had a little crocheted nose bag from an aunt now, alas, no longer whinnying with us. And pictureless books in which small boys, though warned with quotations not to, *would* skate on Farmer Giles' pond and did and drowned; and books that told me everything about the wasp, except why.”

“Go on to the Useless Presents.”

“Bags of moist and many-colored jelly babies and a folded flag and a false nose and a tram-conductor's cap and a machine that punched tickets and rang a bell; never a catapult; once, by mistake that no one could explain, a little hatchet; and a celluloid duck that made, when you pressed it, a most unducklike sound, a mewing moo that an ambitious cat might make who wished to be a cow; and a painting book in which I could make the grass, the trees, the sea and the animals any color I pleased, and still the dazzling sky-blue sheep are grazing in the red field under the rainbow-billed

and pea-green birds. Hardboileds, toffee, fudge and allsorts, crunches, cracknels, humbugs, glaciers, marzipan, and butterwelsh for the Welsh. And troops of bright tin soldiers who, if they could not fight, could always run. And Snakes-and-Families and Happy Ladders. And Easy Hobbi-Games for Little Engineers, complete with instructions. Oh, easy for Leonardo!





And a whistle to make the dogs bark to wake up the old man next door to make him beat on the wall with his stick to shake our picture off the wall. And a packet of cigarettes: you put one in your mouth and you stood at the corner of the street and you waited for hours, in vain, for an old lady to scold you for smoking a cigarette, and then with a smirk you ate it. And then it was breakfast under the balloons."

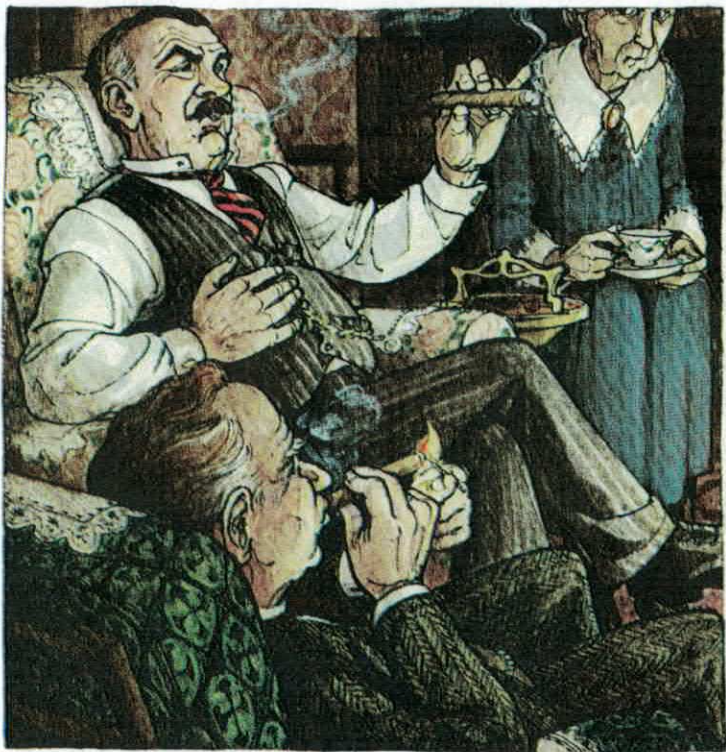
"Were there Uncles, like in our house?"

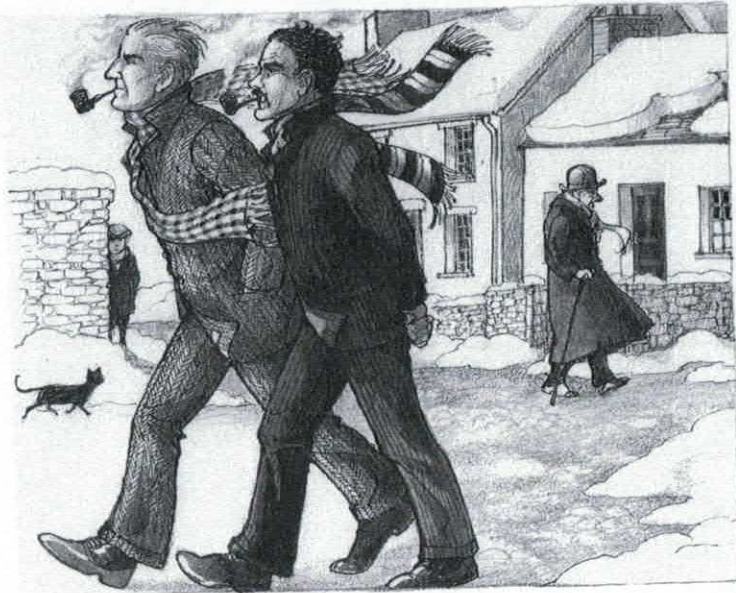
"There are always Uncles at Christmas. The same Uncles. And on Christmas mornings, with dog-disturbing whistle and sugar fags, I would scour the swatched town for the news of the little

world, and find always a dead bird by the white Post Office or by the deserted swings; perhaps a robin, all but one of his fires out. Men and women wading or scooping back from chapel, with tap-room noses and wind-bussed cheeks, all albinos, huddled their stiff black jarring feathers against the irreligious snow. Mistletoe hung from the gas brackets in all the front parlors; there was sherry and walnuts and bottled beer and crackers by the dessertspoons; and cats in their fur-about watched the fires; and the high-heaped fire spat, all ready for the chestnuts and the mulling pokers.



Some few large men sat in the front parlors, without their collars, Uncles almost certainly, trying their new cigars, holding them out judiciously at arms' length, returning them to their mouths, coughing, then holding them out again as though waiting for the explosion; and some few small aunts, not wanted in the kitchen, nor anywhere else for that matter, sat on the very edges of their chairs, poised and brittle, afraid to break, like faded cups and saucers."





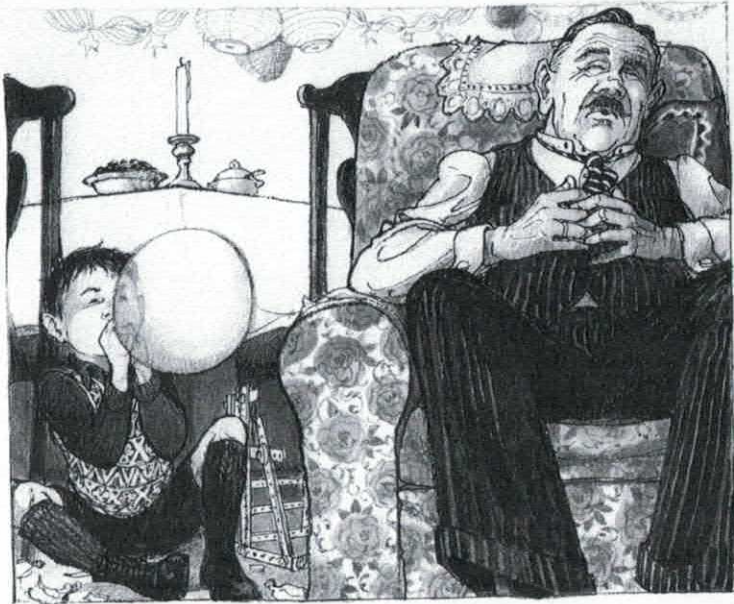
Not many those mornings trod the piling streets: an old man always, fawn-bowled, yellow-gloved and, at this time of year, with spats of snow, would take his constitutional to the white bowling green and back, as he would take it wet or fine on Christmas Day or Doomsday; sometimes two hale young men, with big pipes blazing, no overcoats and wind-blown scarfs, would trudge, unspeaking, down to the forlorn sea, to work up an appetite, to blow away the fumes, who knows, to walk into the waves until nothing of them was left but the two curling smoke clouds of their inextinguishable briars. Then I would be slap-dashing home, the gravy smell of the dinners of others, the bird smell,

the brandy, the pudding and mince, coiling up to my nostrils, when out of a snow-clogged side lane would come a boy the spit of myself, with a pink-tipped cigarette and the violet past of a black eye, cocky as a bullfinch, leering all to himself. I hated him on sight and sound, and would be about to put my dog whistle to my lips and blow him off the face of Christmas when suddenly he, with a violet wink, put *his* whistle to *his* lips and blew so stridently, so high, so exquisitely loud, that gobbling faces, their cheeks bulged with goose, would press against their tinsel windows, the whole length of the white echoing street.





For dinner we had turkey and blazing pudding, and after dinner the Uncles sat in front of the fire, loosened all buttons, put their large moist hands over their watch chains, groaned a little and slept. Mothers, aunts and sisters scuttled to and fro, bearing tureens. Auntie Bessie, who had already been frightened, twice, by a clock-work mouse, whimpered at the sideboard and had some elderberry wine. The dog was sick. Auntie Dosie had to have three aspirins, but Auntie Hannah, who liked port, stood in the middle of the snowbound back yard, singing like a big-bosomed thrush.



I would blow up balloons to see how big they would blow up to; and, when they burst, which they all did, the Uncles jumped and rumbled. In the rich and heavy afternoon, the Uncles breathing like dolphins and the snow descending, I would sit among festoons and Chinese lanterns and nibble dates and try to make a model man-o'-war, following the Instructions for Little Engineers, and produce what might be mistaken for a sea-going tramcar.

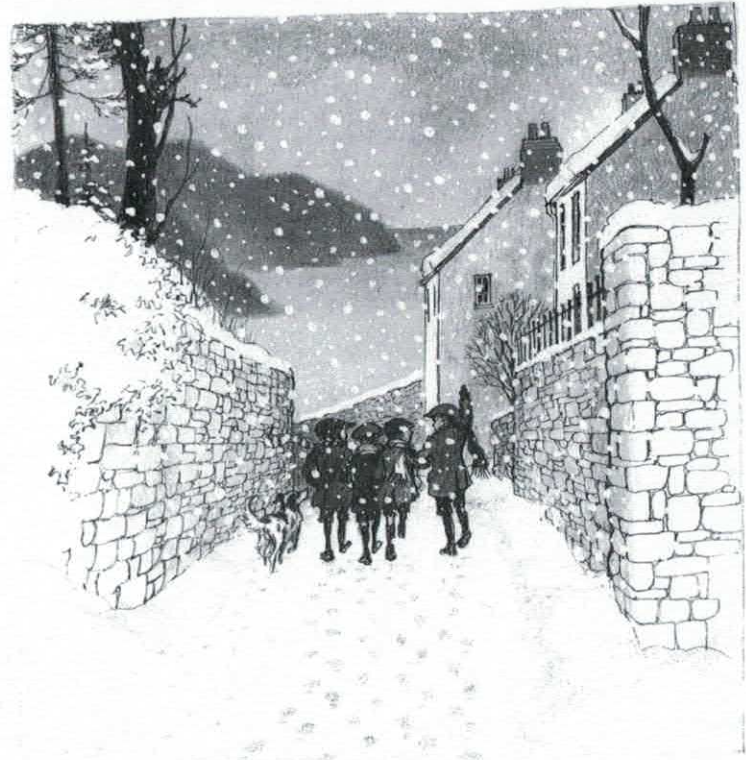
Or I would go out, my bright new boots squeaking, into the white world, on to the seaward hill, to call on Jim and Dan and Jack and to pad through the still streets, leaving huge deep footprints on the hidden pavements.

"I bet people will think there's been hippos."
"What would you do if you saw a hippo coming down our street?"

"I'd go like this, bang! I'd throw him over the railings and roll him down the hill and then I'd tickle him under the ear and he'd wag his tail."

"What would you do if you saw *two* hippos?"

Iron-flanked and bellowing he-hippos clanked and battered through the scudding snow toward us as we passed Mr. Daniel's house.

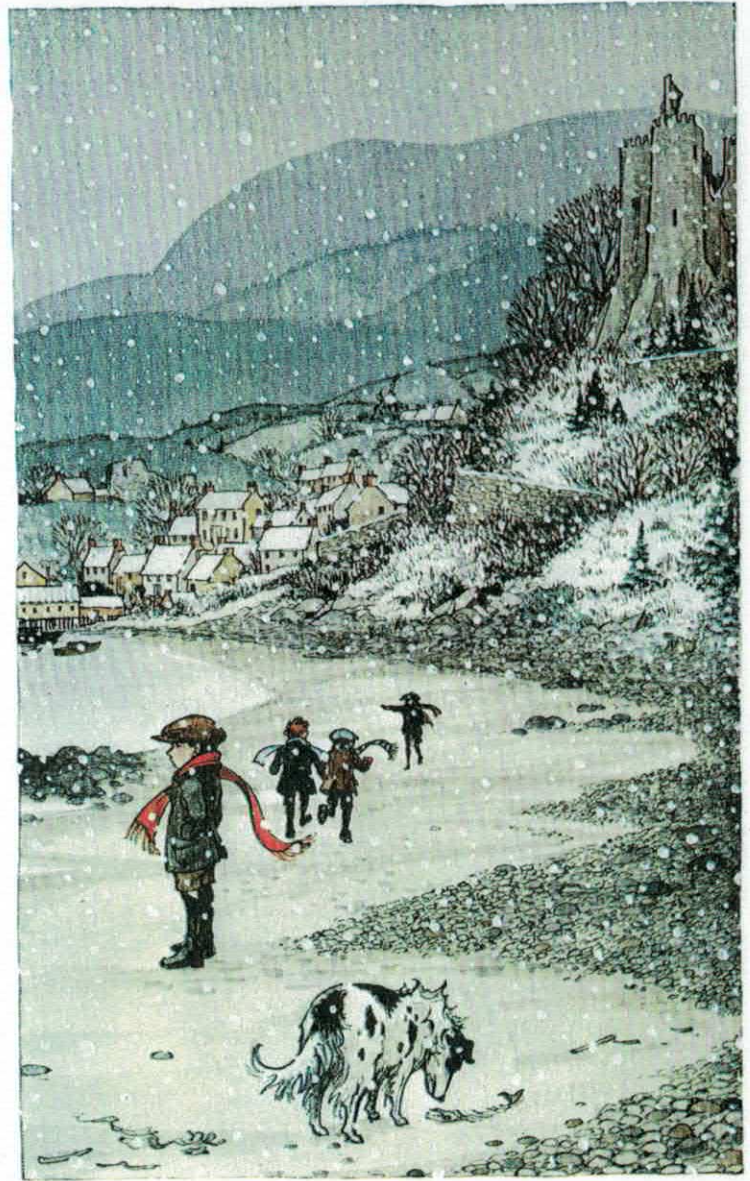
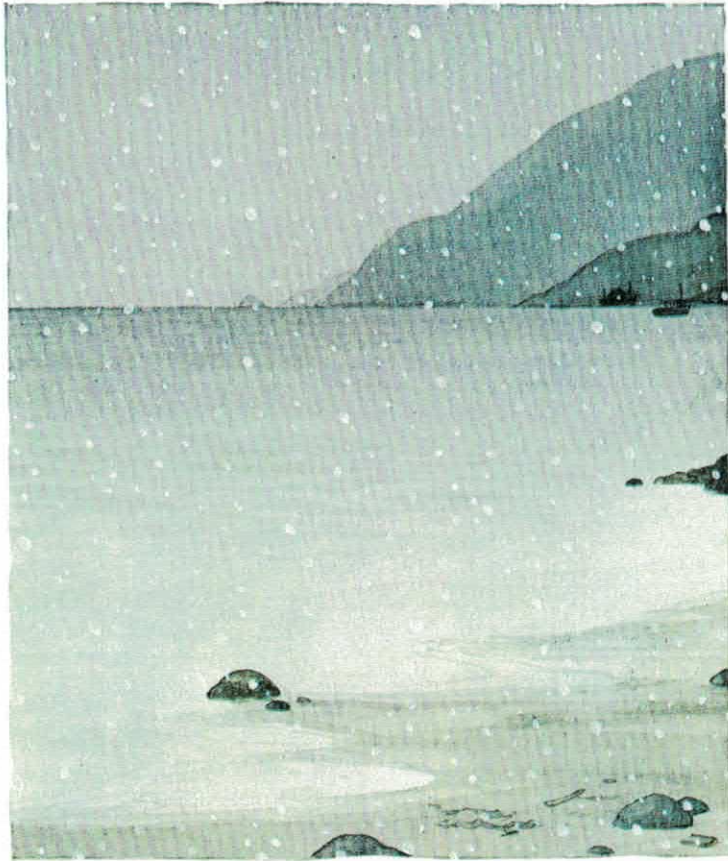


"Let's post Mr. Daniel a snowball through his letter box."

"Let's write things in the snow."

"Let's write, 'Mr. Daniel looks like a spaniel' all over his lawn."

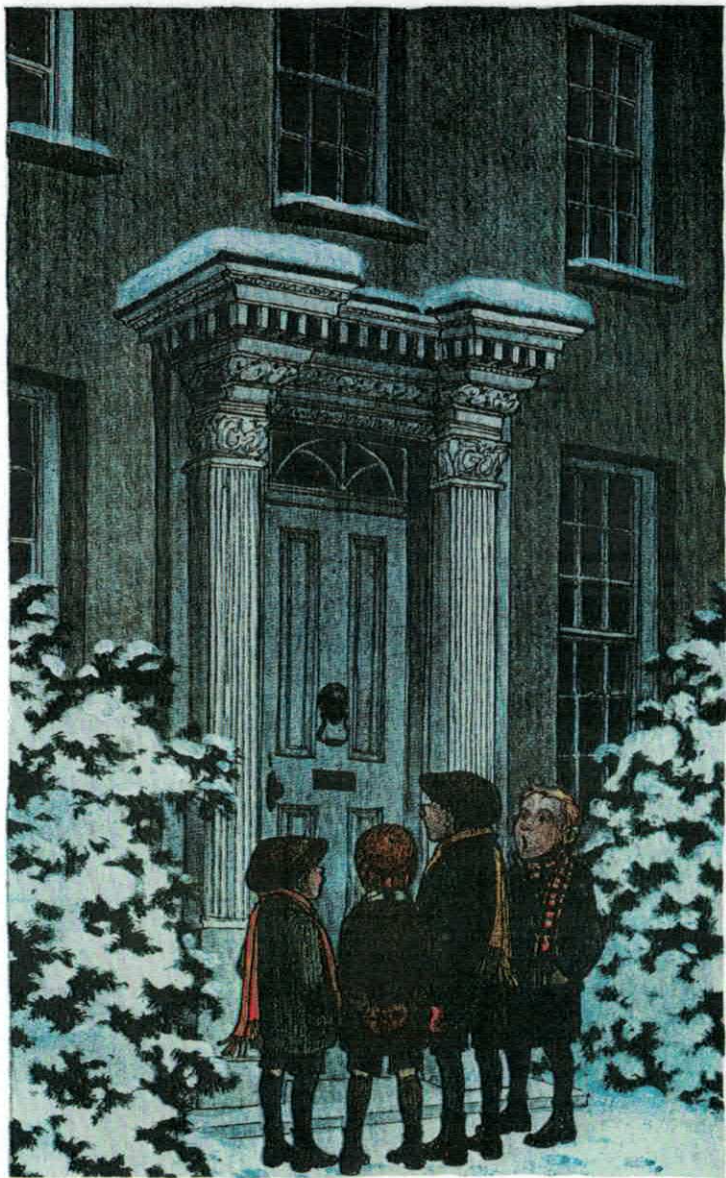
Or we walked on the white shore. "Can the fishes see it's snowing?"



The silent one-clouded heavens drifted on to the sea. Now we were snow-blind travelers lost on the north hills, and vast dewlapped dogs, with flasks round their necks, ambled and shambled up to us, baying "Excelsior." We returned home through the poor streets where only a few children fumbled with bare red fingers in the wheel-rutted snow and cat-called after us, their voices fading away, as we trudged uphill, into the cries of the dock birds and the hooting of ships out in the whirling bay. And then, at tea the recovered Uncles would be jolly; and the ice cake loomed in the center of the table like a marble grave. Auntie Hannah laced her tea with rum, because it was only once a year.



Bring out the tall tales now that we told by the fire as the gaslight bubbled like a diver. Ghosts whooped like owls in the long nights when I dared not look over my shoulder; animals lurked in the cubbyhole under the stairs where the gas meter ticked. And I remember that we went singing carols once, when there wasn't the shaving of a moon to light the flying streets. At the end of a long road was a drive that led to a large house, and we stumbled up the darkness of the drive that night, each one of us afraid, each one holding a stone in his hand in case, and all of us too brave to say a word. The wind through the trees made noises as of old and unpleasant and maybe webfooted men wheezing in caves. We reached the black bulk of the house.



“What shall we give them? Hark the Herald?”
“No,” Jack said, “Good King Wenceslas. I’ll count three.”

One, two, three, and we began to sing, our voices high and seemingly distant in the snow-felted darkness round the house that was occupied by nobody we knew. We stood close together, near the dark door.

*Good King Wenceslas looked out
On the Feast of Stephen . . .*

And then a small, dry voice, like the voice of someone who has not spoken for a long time, joined our singing: a small, dry, eggshell voice from the other side of the door: a small dry voice through the keyhole. And when we stopped running we were outside *our* house; the front room was lovely; balloons floated under the hot-water-bottle-gulping gas; everything was good again and shone over the town.

"Perhaps it was a ghost," Jim said.

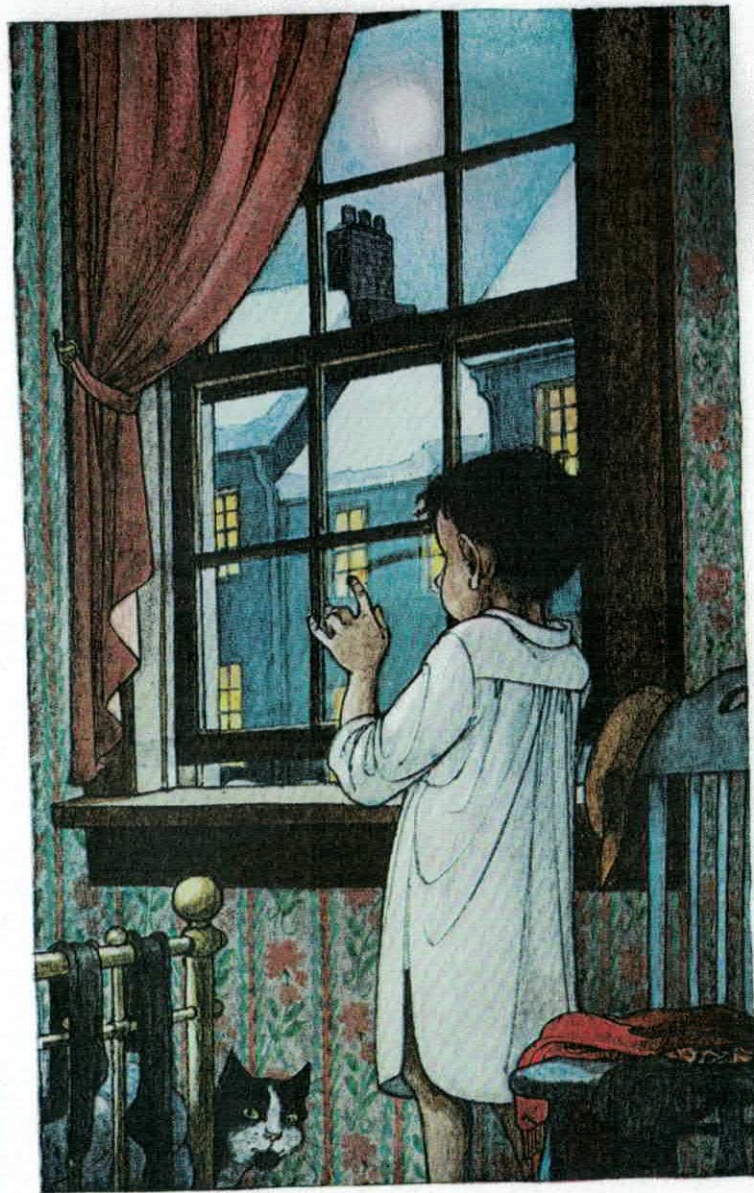
"Perhaps it was trolls," Dan said, who was always reading.

"Let's go in and see if there's any jelly left," Jack said. And we did that.



Always on Christmas night there was music. An uncle played the fiddle, a cousin sang "Cherry Ripe," and another uncle sang "Drake's Drum." It was very warm in the little house. Auntie Hannah, who had got on to the parsnip wine, sang a song about Bleeding Hearts and Death, and then another in which she said her heart was like a Bird's Nest; and then everybody laughed again; and then I went to bed.

Looking through my bedroom window, out into the moonlight and the unending smoke-colored snow, I could see the lights in the windows of all the other houses on our hill and hear the music rising from them up the long, steadily falling night. I turned the gas down, I got into bed. I said some words to the close and holy darkness, and then I slept.



CARSON McCULLERS

STORIES, PLAYS &
OTHER WRITINGS

Complete Stories

The Member of the Wedding: A Play

The Sojourner

The Square Root of Wonderful

Essays, Poems & Autobiography

Carlos L. Dews, *editor*



THE LIBRARY OF AMERICA

A Hospital Christmas Eve

I MET CAROL a few days before the Christmas when we were both patients in the hospital for physical therapy. Carol was a very busy girl; she painted in watercolors, drew with crayons, and most of all she planned for her future. At that time, she was planning for a Christmas Eve party, for it was to be the first time in her life that she was going to walk with her new prosthetic legs to a party.

Carol was an amputee. She had been born with legs so twisted that when she was nineteen years old, she had them amputated.

On this Christmas Eve, there were loads of visitors in the ward, families and friends of the patients' and parties organized by the hospital. But for Carol it was a catastrophe. The party she had yearned to go to was denied her because one of the legs was being repaired. It was going to ruin her Christmas Eve, and when I looked at her, I saw that silently, bitterly, she was weeping.

I asked her to come over to see me. She was very adept at her wheelchair and came over, still crying.

"Of all the times in the year this leg had to be fixed—just when I was so looking forward to walking to the party and showing my friends my new legs."

We talked for a while, and I read to her the most living piece of literature, except for the Bible, that I know. James Joyce's "The Dead."

A few light taps upon the pane made him turn to the window. It had begun to snow again. He watched sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight. The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on

the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.

I read it as much to comfort myself as to comfort her, and the beauty of the language brought peace and loveliness to both of us on that Christmas Eve in that hospital ward.

She was a girl of magnificent courage, accepting the infirmities of her life with grace and equanimity. Still, I knew that she was troubled about the party, because she repeated, "Tonight of all nights, when I was going to walk in and show my friends."

The doctors also were troubled, and suddenly, like a rising wind, there was a small commotion in the corridor. News was being passed around that Carol's leg was going to be fixed in time and she could go to her party, after all. There was general rejoicing in the nine-bed ward, and Carol wept again, with excitement.

When it was time for the party to begin, Carol was dressed immaculately and wearing her finest clothes. Her legs were brought to her, and she used the skills for walking that she had been taught so very recently. A doctor looked in the doorway to see how she was getting on, and the therapist said, "Good girl, Carol."

She checked the straps on her prosthetic legs, and then she struggled to get into a standing position, and with her head held high, she walked proudly down the corridor of the ward to where her friends were waiting for her.

I knew that the long months of suffering, heroism, hard work and courage had paid off and that Carol would really be all right.

The last time I heard from her, she was attending college, joining in all the student activities, and was planning to teach physio-therapy after graduation.

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The Discovery of Christmas

THE CHRISTMAS of my fifth year, when we still lived in the old downtown Georgia home, I had just recovered from scarlet fever, and that Christmas Day I overcame a rivalry that like the fever had mottled and blanched my sickened heart. This rivalry that changed to love overshadowed my discovery that Santa Claus and Jesus were not the kin I had supposed.

The scarlet fever came first. In November my brother Budge and I were quarantined in the back room and for six weeks' time hovered over thermometers, potties, alcohol rubs and Rosa Henderson. Rosa was the practical nurse who cared for us, as Mother had deserted me for my hated rival—the new baby sister. Mother would half-open the door and pass the presents that came to the house to Rosa, calling out some words before she shut the door. She did not bring the baby and I was glad of that. There were many presents and Rosa put them in a big soapbox between the beds of my brother and me. There were games, modeling clay, paint sets, cutting-out scissors and engines.

Budge was much littler than I was. He was too little to count straight, to play *Parcheesi*, to wipe himself. He could only model squashed balls and cut out easy, big round things like magazine pictures of Santa Claus. Then his tongue would wiggle out of the corner of his mouth because of the difficulty. I cut out the hard things and paper dolls. When he played the harp it made a sickening shriek. I played *Dixie* and Christmas carols.

Toward dark Rosa read aloud to us. She read *Child Life*, storybooks or a *True Confessions* magazine. Her soft, stumbling voice would rise and fall in the quiet room as firelit shadows staggered gold and gray upon the walls. At that time there were only the changing tones of her colored voice and the changing walls in the firelight. Except sometimes the baby cried and I felt as if a worm crawled inside me and played the harp to drown out the sound.

It was late fall when the quarantine began and through the closed windows we could see the autumn leaves falling against the blue sky and sunlight. We sang:

Come, little leaves, said the wind one day,
Come o'er the meadows with me and play . . .

Then suddenly one morning Jack Frost silvered the grass and roof tops. Rosa mentioned that Christmas was not long away.

"How long?"

"About as long as that settlelord chain, I reckon." Toward the end of the quarantine we had been making a Celluloid chain of many different colors. I puzzled about the answer and Budge thought and put his tongue on the corner of his mouth. Rosa added, "Christmas is on the twenty-fifth of December—directly I will count the days. If you listen you can hear the reindeers come galloping from the North Pole. It's not long."

"Will we be loose from this old room by then?"

"I trust the Lord."

A sudden terrible thought came to me. "Are people ever sick on Christmas?"

"Yes, Baby." Rosa was making supper toast by the fire, turning it carefully with a long toast fork. Her voice was like torn paper when she said again, "My little son died on Christmas Day."

"Died! Sherman died!"

"You know it isn't Sherman," she said sternly. "Sherman comes to our winder every day and you know it." Sherman was a big boy and after school he would stand by our window and Rosa would open it from the bottom and talk with him a long time and sometimes give him a dime to go to the store. Sherman held his nose all the time he was at the window so that his voice twanged, like a ukulele string. "It was Sherman's little brother—a long time ago."

"Was he sick with scarlet fever?"

"No. He burned to death on Christmas morning. He was just a baby and Sherman put him down on the hearth to play with him. Then—childlike—Sherman forgot about him and left him alone on the hearth. The fire popped and a spark caught his little nightgown, and by the time I knew about it my baby was—that was how come I got this here wrinkled white scar on my neck."

"Was your baby like our new baby?"

"Near 'bout the same age."

I thought about it a long time before I said: "Was Sherman glad?"

"Why, what shape of thoughts is in your head, Sister?"

"I don't like babies," I said.

"You will like the baby later on. Just like you love your brother now."

"Bonny smells bad," I said.

"Most every child don't like the new baby until they get used to it."

"Are *every* and *ever* the same?" I asked.

Those were the days when we were peeling. Every day Budge and I peeled strips and patches of skin and saved them in a pillbox.

"I wonder what we're going to do with all this skin we've saved?"

"Face that when the time comes, Sister. Enjoy it while you can."

"I wonder what we're going to do with this long chain we've made." I looked at the chain that was piled in the box between the beds of my brother and me. It covered all the other toys—the dolls, engines and all.

The quarantine ended and the joy of our release battled with a sudden, inexplicable grief: all our toys were going to be burned. Every toy, the chain, even the peeled skin, which seemed the most terrible loss of all.

"It's on account of the germs," Rosa said. "Everything burned and the beds and mattresses will go to the germ disinfectory man. And the room scoured with Lysol."

I stood on the threshold of the room after the germ man had gone. There were no echoes of toys—no beds, no furniture. The room was bitter cold, and the damp floor was sharp-smelling, the windows wet. My heart shut with the closing door.

Mother had sewed me a red dress for the Christmas season. Budge and I were free to walk in all the rooms and go out of the yard. But I was not happy. The baby was always in my mother's lap. Mary, the cook, would say, "Goosa-goosa-ga," and Daddy would throw the baby in the air.

There was a terrible song that Christmas:

Hang up the baby's stocking;
 Be sure you don't forget—
 The dear little dimpled darling!
 She ne'er saw Christmas yet . . .

I hated the whining tune and the words so much that I put my fingers in my ears and hummed *Dixie* until the talk changed to Santa's reindeer, the North Pole and the magic of Christmas.

Three days before Christmas the real and the magic collided so suddenly that my world of understanding was instantly scattered. For some reason I don't remember now, I opened the door of the scarlet-fever room and stopped on the threshold, spellbound and trembling. The room rioted before my unbelieving eyes. Nothing familiar was there and the space was filled with everything Budge and I had written on the Santa Claus list and sent up the chimney. All that and even more—so that the room was like a Santa Claus room in a department store. There were a tricycle, a doll, a train with tracks and a child's table and four chairs. I doubted the reality of what I saw and looked at the familiar tree outside the window and at a crack on the ceiling I knew well. Then I moved around with the light, secret way of a child who meddles. I touched the table, the toys with a careful forefinger. They were touchable, real. Then I saw a wonderful, unasked-for thing—a green monkey with an organ grinder. The monkey wore a scarlet coat and looked very real with his monkey-anxious face and worried eyes. I loved the monkey but did not dare touch him. I looked around the Santa Claus room a last time. There was a hush, a stasis in my heart that follows the shock of revelation. I closed the door and walked away slowly, weighed by too much wisdom.

Mother was knitting in the front room and the baby was there in her play pen.

I took a big breath and said in a demanding voice: "Why are the Santa Claus things in the back room?"

Mother had the stumbling look of someone who is telling a story. "Why, Sister, Santa Claus asked your father if he could store some things in the back room."

I didn't believe it and said: "I think that Santa Claus is only parents."

"Why, Sister, darling!"

"I wondered about chimneys. Butch doesn't even have a chimney but Santa Claus always comes to him."

"Sometimes he walks in the door."

For the first time I knew my mother was telling me stories and I was thinking. "Is Jesus real? Santa Claus and Jesus are close kin, I know."

Mamma put down her knitting. "Santa Claus is toys and stores and Jesus is church."

This mention of church brought to me thoughts of boredom, colored windows, organ music, restlessness. I hated church and Jesus if church was Jesus. I loved only Santa Claus and he was not real.

Mother tried again: "Jesus is as the holy infant—like Bonny. The Christ child."

This was the worst of all. I squatted on the floor and bawled in the baby's face, "Santa Claus is only parents! Jesus is—"

The baby began to cry and Mother picked her up and cuddled her in her lap. "Now you behave yourself, young lady; you're making Bonny cry."

"I hate that old ugly Bonny," I wailed and went to the hall to cry.

Christmas Day was like a twice-done happening. I played with the monkey under the tree and helped Budge lay the tracks for the train. The baby had blocks and a rubber doll and she cried and didn't play. Budge and I ate a whole layer of our box of Treasure Island chocolates and by afternoon we were jaded by play and candy.

Later I was sitting on the floor alone in the Christmasy room except for the baby in her play pen. The bright tree glowed in the winter light. Suddenly I thought of Rosa Henderson and the baby who was burned on Christmas Day. I looked at Bonny and glanced around the room. Mother and Daddy had gone to visit my Uncle Will, and Mary was in the kitchen. I was alone. Carefully I lifted the baby and put her on the hearth. In the unclear conscious of five years old I did not feel that I was doing wrong. I wondered if the fire would pop and went to the back room with my brother, sad and troubled.

It was our family custom to have fireworks on Christmas

night. Daddy would light a bonfire after dark and we would shoot Roman candles and skyrockets. I remembered. The box of fireworks was on the mantelpiece of the back room and I opened it and selected two Roman candles. I asked Budge, "Do you want to do something fun?" I knew clearly this was wrong. But, angry and sad, I wanted to do wrong. I held the Roman candles to the fire and gave one to Budge. "Watch here."

I thought I remembered the fireworks, but I had never seen anything like this. After a hiss and sputter the Roman candles, violent and alive, shot in streams of yellow and red. We stood on opposite sides of the room and the blazing fireworks ricocheted from wall to wall in an arc of splendor and terror. It lasted a long time and we stood transfixed in the radiant, fearful room. When finally it was finished, my hostile feelings had disappeared. I was quiet in the very silent room.

I thought I heard the baby cry, but when I ran to the living room I knew she was not crying nor had she been burned and gone up the chimney. She had turned over and was crawling toward the Christmas tree. Her little-fingered hands were on the floor, her nightgown was hiked over her diapers. I had never seen Bonny crawl before and I watched her with the first feelings of love and pride, the old hostility gone forever.

I played with Bonny with a heart cleansed of jealousy and joyful for the first time in many months. I was reconciled that Santa Claus was only family but with this new tranquility, I felt maybe my family and Jesus were somehow kin. Soon afterward, when we moved to a new house in the suburbs, I taught Bonny how to walk and even let her hold the monkey while I played the organ grinder.

CARSON McCULLERS

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CHRISTMAS

Home for Christmas

SOMETIMES IN AUGUST, weary of the vacant, broiling after noon, my younger brother and sister and I would gather in the dense shade under the oak tree in the back yard and talk of Christmas and sing carols. Once after such a conclave, when the tunes of the carols still lingered in the heat-shimmered air, I remember climbing up into the tree-house and sitting there alone for a long time.

Brother called up: "What are you doing?"

"Thinking," I answered.

"What are you thinking about?"

"I don't know."

"Well, how can you be thinking when you don't know what you are thinking about?"

I did not want to talk with my brother. I was experiencing the first wonder about the mystery of Time. Here I was, on this August afternoon, in the tree-house, in the burnt, jaded yard, sick and tired of all our summer ways. (I had read *Little Women* for the second time, *Hans Brinker and the Silver Skates*, *Little Men*, and *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*. I had read movie magazines and even tried to read love stories in the *Woman's Home Companion*—I was so sick of everything.) How could it be that I was I and now was now when in four months it would be Christmas, wintertime, cold weather, twilight and the glory of the Christmas tree? I puzzled about the *now* and *later* and rubbed the inside of my elbow until there was a little roll of dirt between my forefinger and thumb. Would the *now* I of the tree-house and the August afternoon be the same *I* of winter, firelight and the Christmas tree? I wondered.

My brother repeated: "You say you are thinking but you don't know what you are thinking about. What are you really doing up there? Have you got some secret candy?"

September came, and my mother opened the cedar chest and we tried on winter coats and last year's sweaters to see if

they would do again. She took the three of us downtown and bought us new shoes and school clothes.

Christmas was nearer on the September Sunday that Daddy rounded us up in the car and drove us out on dusty country roads to pick elderberry blooms. Daddy made wine from elderberry blossoms—it was a yellow-white wine, the color of weak winter sun. The wine was dry to the wry side—indeed, some years it turned to vinegar. The wine was served at Christmastime with slices of fruitcake when company came. On November Sundays we went to the woods with a big basket of fried chicken dinner, thermos jug and coffee-pot. We hunted partridge berries in the pine woods near our town. These scarlet berries grew hidden underneath the glossy brown pine needles that lay in a slick carpet beneath the tall wind-singing trees. The bright berries were a Christmas decoration, lasting in water through the whole season.

In December the windows downtown were filled with toys, and my brother and sister and I were given two dollars apiece to buy our Christmas presents. We patronized the ten-cent stores, choosing between jackstones, pencil boxes, water colors and satin handkerchief holders. We would each buy a nickel's worth of lump milk chocolate at the candy counter to mouth as we trudged from counter to counter, choice to choice. It was exacting and final—taking several afternoons—for the dime stores would not take back or exchange.

Mother made fruitcakes, and for weeks ahead the family picked out the nut meats of pecans and walnuts, careful of the bitter layer of the pecans that lined your mouth with nasty fur. At the last I was allowed to blanch the almonds, pinching the scalded nuts so that they sometimes hit the ceiling or bounced across the room. Mother cut slices of citron and crystallized pineapple, figs and dates, and candied cherries were added whole. We cut rounds of brown paper to line the pans. Usually the cakes were mixed and put into the oven when we were in school. Late in the afternoon the cakes would be finished, wrapped in white napkins on the breakfast-room table. Later they would be soaked in brandy. These fruitcakes were famous in our town, and Mother gave them often as Christmas gifts. When company came thin slices of fruitcake, wine and coffee were always served. When you held a slice of fruitcake to the

window or the firelight the slice was translucent, pale citron green and yellow and red, with the glow and richness of our church windows.

Daddy was a jeweler, and his store was kept open until midnight all Christmas week. I, as the eldest child, was allowed to stay up late with Mother until Daddy came home. Mother was always nervous without a "man in the house." (On those rare occasions when Daddy had to stay overnight on business in Atlanta, the children were armed with a hammer, saw and a monkey wrench. When pressed about her anxieties Mother claimed she was afraid of "escaped convicts or crazy people." I never saw an escaped convict, but once a "crazy" person did come to see us. She was an old, old lady dressed in elegant black taffeta, my mother's second cousin once removed, and came on a tranquil Sunday morning and announced that she had always liked our house and she intended to stay with us until she died. Her sons and daughters and grandchildren gathered around to plead with her as she sat rocking in our front porch rocking chair and she left not unwillingly when they promised a car ride and ice cream.) Nothing ever happened on those evenings in Christmas week, but I felt grown, aged suddenly by trust and dignity. Mother confided in secrecy what the younger children were getting from Santa Claus. I knew where the Santa Claus things were hidden, and was appointed to see that my brother and sister did not go into the back-room closet or the wardrobe in our parents' room.

Christmas Eve was the longest day, but it was lined with the glory of tomorrow. The sitting-room smelled of floor wax and the clean, cold odor of the spruce tree. The Christmas tree stood in a corner of the front room, tall as the ceiling, majestic, undecorated. It was our family custom that the tree was not decorated until after we children were in bed on Christmas Eve night. We went to bed very early, as soon as it was winter dark. I lay in the bed beside my sister and tried to keep her awake.

"You want to guess again about your Santa Claus?"

"We've already done that so much," she said.

My sister slept. And there again was another puzzle. How could it be that when she opened her eyes it would be Christmas while I lay awake in the dark for hours and hours? The time was the same for both of us, and yet not at all the same. What

was it? How? I thought of Bethlehem and cherry candy, Jesus and skyrocket. It was dark when I awoke. We were allowed to get up on Christmas at five o'clock. Later I found out that Daddy juggled the clock Christmas Eve so that five o'clock was actually six. Anyway it was always still dark when we rushed in to dress by the kitchen stove. The rule was that we dress and eat breakfast before we could go in to the Christmas tree. On Christmas morning we always had fish roe, bacon and grits for breakfast. I grudged every mouthful—for who wanted to fill up on breakfast when there in the sitting-room was candy, at least three whole boxes? After breakfast we lined up, and carols were started. Our voices rose naked and mysterious as we filed through the door to the sitting-room. The carol, unfinished, ended in raw yells of joy.

The Christmas tree glittered in the glorious, candlelit room. There were bicycles and bundles wrapped in tissue paper. Our stockings hanging from the mantelpiece bulged with oranges, nuts and smaller presents. The next hours were paradise. The blue dawn at the window brightened, and the candles were blown out. By nine o'clock we had ridden the wheel presents and dressed in the clothes gifts. We visited the neighborhood children and were visited in turn. Our cousins came and grown relatives from distant neighborhoods. All through the morning we ate chocolates. At two or three o'clock the Christmas dinner was served. The dining-room table had been let out with extra leaves and the very best linen was laid—satin damask with a rose design. Daddy asked the blessing, then stood up to carve the turkey. Dressing, rice and giblet gravy were served. There were cut-glass dishes of sparkling jellies and stateliness of festal wine. For dessert there was always sillabub or charlotte and fruitcake. The afternoon was almost over when dinner was done.

At twilight I sat on the front steps, jaded by too much pleasure, sick at the stomach and worn out. The boy next door skated down the street in his new Indian suit. A girl spun around on a crackling son-of-a-gun. My brother waved sparklers. Christmas was over. I thought of the monotony of Time ahead, unsolaced by the distant glow of paler festivals, the year that stretched before another Christmas—eternity.

Complete Works of
OSCAR WILDE

With an Introduction by
VYVYAN HOLLAND



Harper & Row, Publishers, New York
Grand Rapids, Philadelphia, St. Louis, San Francisco
London, Singapore, Sydney, Tokyo

THE SELFISH GIANT

EVERY afternoon, as they were coming from school, the children used to go and play in the Giant's garden. It was a large lovely garden, with soft green grass. Here and there over the grass stood beautiful flowers like stars, and there were twelve peach-trees that in the spring-time broke out into delicate blossoms of pink and pearl, and in the autumn bore rich fruit. The birds sat on the trees and sang so sweetly that the children used to stop their games in order to listen to them. "How happy we are here!" they cried to each other.

One day the Giant came back. He had been to visit his friend the Cornish ogre, and had stayed with him for seven years. After the seven years were over he had said all that he had to say, for his conversation was limited, and he determined to return to his own castle. When he arrived he saw the children playing in the garden.

"What are you doing here?" he cried in a very gruff voice, and the children ran away.

"My own garden is my own garden," said the Giant; "any one can understand that, and I will allow nobody to play in it but myself." So he built a high wall all round it, and put up a notice-board.

TRESPASSERS
WILL BE
PROSECUTED

He was a very selfish Giant.

The poor children had now nowhere to play. They tried to play on the road, but the road was very dusty and full of hard stones, and they did not like it. They used to wander round the high walls when their lessons were over, and talk about the beautiful garden inside. "How happy we were there!" they said to each other.

Then the Spring came, and all over the country there were little blossoms and little birds. Only in the garden of the Selfish Giant it was still winter. The birds did not care to sing in it as there were no children, and the trees forgot to blossom. Once a beautiful flower put its head out from the grass, but when it saw the notice-board it was so sorry for the children that it slipped back into the ground again, and went off to sleep. The only people who were pleased were the Snow and the Frost. "Spring has forgotten this garden," they cried, "so we will live here all the year round." The Snow covered up the grass with her great white cloak, and the Frost painted all the trees silver. Then they invited the North Wind to stay with them, and he

came. He was wrapped in furs, and he roared all day about the garden, and blew the chimney-pots down. "This is a delightful spot," he said, "we must ask the Hail on a visit." So the Hail came. Every day for three hours he rattled on the roof of the castle till he broke most of the slates, and then he ran round and round the garden as fast as he could go. He was dressed in grey, and his breath was like ice.

"I cannot understand why the Spring is so late in coming," said the Selfish Giant, as he sat at the window and looked out at his cold, white garden; "I hope there will be a change in the weather."

But the Spring never came, nor the Summer. The Autumn gave golden fruit to every garden, but to the Giant's garden she gave none. "He is too selfish," she said. So it was always Winter there, and the North Wind and the Hail, and the Frost, and the Snow danced about through the trees.

One morning the Giant was lying awake in bed when he heard some lovely music. It sounded so sweet to his ears that he thought it must be the King's musicians passing by. It was really only a little linnet singing outside his window, but it was so long since he had heard a bird sing in his garden that it seemed to him to be the most beautiful music in the world. Then the Hail stopped dancing over his head, and the North Wind ceased roaring, and a delicious perfume came to him through the open casement. "I believe the Spring has come at last," said the Giant; and he jumped out of bed and looked out.

What did he see?

He saw a most wonderful sight. Through a little hole in the wall the children had crept in, and they were sitting in the branches of the trees. In every tree that he could see there was a little child. And the trees were so glad to have the children back again that they had covered themselves with blossoms, and were waving their arms gently above the children's heads. The birds were flying about and twittering with delight, and the flowers were looking up through the green grass and laughing. It was a lovely scene, only in one corner it was still winter. It was the farthest corner of the garden, and in it was standing a little boy. He was so small that he could not reach up to the branches of the tree, and he was wandering all round it, crying bitterly. The poor tree was still covered with frost and snow, and the North Wind was blowing and roaring above it. "Climb up! little boy," said the Tree, and it bent its branches down as low as it could; but the boy was too tiny.

And the Giant's heart melted as he looked out. "How selfish I have been!" he said; "now I know why the Spring would not come here. I will put that poor little boy on the top of the tree, and then I will knock down the wall, and my garden shall be the children's playground for ever and ever." He was really very sorry for what he had done.

So he crept downstairs and opened the front door quite softly, and went out into the garden. But when the children saw him they were

so frightened that they all ran away, and the garden became winter again. Only the little boy did not run, for his eyes were so full of tears that he did not see the Giant coming. And the Giant stole up behind him and took him gently in his hand, and put him up into the tree. And the tree broke at once into blossom, and the birds came and sang on it, and the little boy stretched out his two arms and flung them round the Giant's neck, and kissed him. And the other children when they saw that the Giant was not wicked any longer, came running back, and with them came the Spring. "It is your garden now, little children," said the Giant, and he took a great axe and knocked down the wall. And when the people were going to market at twelve o'clock they found the Giant playing with the children in the most beautiful garden they had ever seen.

All day long they played, and in the evening they came to the Giant to bid him good-bye.

"But where is your little companion?" he said: "the boy I put into the tree." The Giant loved him the best because he had kissed him.

"We don't know," answered the children: "he has gone away."

"You must tell him to be sure and come to-morrow," said the Giant. But the children said that they did not know where he lived, and had never seen him before; and the Giant felt very sad.

Every afternoon, when school was over, the children came and played with the Giant. But the little boy whom the Giant loved was never seen again. The Giant was very kind to all the children, yet he longed for his first little friend, and often spoke of him. "How I would like to see him!" he used to say.

Years went over, and the Giant grew very old and feeble. He could not play about any more, so he sat in a huge arm-chair, and watched the children at their games, and admired his garden. "I have many beautiful flowers," he said; "but the children are the most beautiful flowers of all."

One winter morning he looked out of his window as he was dressing. He did not hate the Winter now, for he knew that it was merely the Spring asleep, and that the flowers were resting.

Suddenly he rubbed his eyes in wonder and looked and looked. It certainly was a marvellous sight. In the farthest corner of the garden was a tree quite covered with lovely white blossoms. Its branches were golden, and silver fruit hung down from them, and underneath it stood the little boy he had loved.

Downstairs ran the Giant in great joy, and out into the garden. He hastened across the grass, and came near to the child. And when he came quite close his face grew red with anger, and he said, "Who hath dared to wound thee?" For on the palms of the child's hands were the prints of two nails, and the prints of two nails were on the little feet.

"Who hath dared to wound thee?" cried the Giant; "tell me, that I may take my big sword and slay him."

"Nay!" answered the child: "but these are the wounds of Love."

"Who art thou?" said the Giant, and a strange awe fell on him, and he knelt before the little child.

And the child smiled on the Giant, and said to him, "You let me play once in your garden, to-day you shall come with me to my garden, which is Paradise."

And when the children ran in that afternoon, they found the Giant lying dead under the tree, all covered with white blossoms.

TRUMAN CAPOTE

THE COMPLETE
STORIES



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NEW YORK

TRUMAN CAPOTE

2013 Modern Library Edition

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Published in the United States by Modern Library,
an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group,
a division of Random House, Inc., New York.

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Originally published in the United States in hardcover by Random House,
an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of
Random House, Inc., in slightly different form in 2004.

Owing to limitations of space, story credits can be found
beginning on page 329.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Capote, Truman

[Short Stories]

The complete stories of Truman Capote

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-8129-9437-7

I. Title.

PS3505.A59A6 2004

813'.54—dc22

2004046876

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

www.modernlibrary.com

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

Truman Capote was born Truman Streckfus Persons on September 30, 1924, in New Orleans. His early years were affected by an unsettled family life. He was turned over to the care of his mother's family in Monroeville, Alabama; his father was imprisoned for fraud; his parents divorced and then fought a bitter custody battle over Truman. Eventually he moved to New York City to live with his mother and her second husband, a Cuban businessman whose name he adopted. The young Capote got a job as a copyboy at *The New Yorker* in the early forties, but was fired for inadvertently offending Robert Frost. The publication of his early stories in *Harper's Bazaar* established his literary reputation when he was in his twenties. His novel *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948), a Gothic coming-of-age story that Capote described as "an attempt to exorcise demons," and his novella *The Grass Harp* (1951), a gentler fantasy rooted in his Alabama years, consolidated his precocious fame.

From the start of his career Capote associated himself with a wide range of writers and artists, high-society figures, and international celebrities, gaining frequent media attention for

A CHRISTMAS MEMORY

(1956)

Imagine a morning in late November. A coming of winter morning more than twenty years ago. Consider the kitchen of a spreading old house in a country town. A great black stove is its main feature; but there is also a big round table and a fireplace with two rocking chairs placed in front of it. Just today the fireplace commenced its seasonal roar.

A woman with shorn white hair is standing at the kitchen window. She is wearing tennis shoes and a shapeless gray sweater over a summery calico dress. She is small and sprightly, like a bantam hen; but, due to a long youthful illness, her shoulders are pitifully hunched. Her face is remarkable—not unlike Lincoln's, craggy like that, and tinted by sun and wind; but it is delicate too, finely boned, and her eyes are sherry-colored and timid. "Oh my," she exclaims, her breath smoking the windowpane, "it's fruitcake weather!"

The person to whom she is speaking is myself. I am seven; she is sixty-something. We are cousins, very distant ones, and we have lived together—well, as long as I can remember. Other people inhabit the house, relatives; and though they have power over us, and frequently make us cry, we are not, on the whole, too much aware of them. We are each other's best friend. She calls

me Buddy, in memory of a boy who was formerly her best friend. The other Buddy died in the 1880's, when she was still a child. She is still a child.

"I knew it before I got out of bed," she says, turning away from the window with a purposeful excitement in her eyes. "The courthouse bell sounded so cold and clear. And there were no birds singing; they've gone to warmer country, yes indeed. Oh, Buddy, stop stuffing biscuit and fetch our buggy. Help me find my hat. We've thirty cakes to bake."

It's always the same: a morning arrives in November, and my friend, as though officially inaugurating the Christmas time of year that exhilarates her imagination and fuels the blaze of her heart, announces: "It's fruitcake weather! Fetch our buggy. Help me find my hat."

The hat is found, a straw cartwheel corsaged with velvet roses out-of-doors has faded: it once belonged to a more fashionable relative. Together, we guide our buggy, a dilapidated baby carriage, out to the garden and into a grove of pecan trees. The buggy is mine; that is, it was bought for me when I was born. It is made of wicker, rather unraveled, and the wheels wobble like a drunkard's legs. But it is a faithful object; springtimes, we take it to the woods and fill it with flowers, herbs, wild fern for our porch pots; in the summer, we pile it with picnic paraphernalia and sugar-cane fishing poles and roll it down to the edge of a creek; it has its winter uses, too: as a truck for hauling firewood from the yard to the kitchen, as a warm bed for Queenie, our tough little orange and white rat terrier who has survived distemper and two rattlesnake bites. Queenie is trotting beside it now.

Three hours later we are back in the kitchen hulling a heaping buggyload of windfall pecans. Our backs hurt from gathering

them: how hard they were to find (the main crop having been shaken off the trees and sold by the orchard's owners, who are not us) among the concealing leaves, the frosted, deceiving grass. Caarackle! A cheery crunch, scraps of miniature thunder sound as the shells collapse and the golden mound of sweet oily ivory meat mounts in the milk-glass bowl. Queenie begs to taste, and now and again my friend sneaks her a mite, though insisting we deprive ourselves. "We mustn't, Buddy. If we start, we won't stop. And there's scarcely enough as there is. For thirty cakes." The kitchen is growing dark. Dusk turns the window into a mirror: our reflections mingle with the rising moon as we work by the fireside in the firelight. At last, when the moon is quite high, we toss the final hull into the fire and, with joined sighs, watch it catch flame. The buggy is empty, the bowl is brimful.

We eat our supper (cold biscuits, bacon, blackberry jam) and discuss tomorrow. Tomorrow the kind of work I like best begins: buying. Cherries and citron, ginger and vanilla and canned Hawaiian pineapple, rinds and raisins and walnuts and whiskey and oh, so much flour, butter, so many eggs, spices, flavorings: why, we'll need a pony to pull the buggy home.

But before these purchases can be made, there is the question of money. Neither of us has any. Except for skinflint sums persons in the house occasionally provide (a dime is considered very big money); or what we earn ourselves from various activities: holding rummage sales, selling buckets of hand-picked blackberries, jars of homemade jam and apple jelly and peach preserves, rounding up flowers for funerals and weddings. Once we won seventy-ninth prize, five dollars, in a national football contest. Not that we know a fool thing about football. It's just that we enter any contest we hear about: at the moment our

hopes are centered on the fifty-thousand-dollar Grand Prize being offered to name a new brand of coffee (we suggested "a.m."; and, after some hesitation, for my friend thought it perhaps sacrilegious, the slogan "a.m.! Amen!"). To tell the truth, our only *really* profitable enterprise was the Fun and Freak Museum we conducted in a back-yard woodshed two summers ago. The Fun was a stereopticon with slide views of Washington and New York lent us by a relative who had been to those places (she was furious when she discovered why we'd borrowed it); the Freak was a three-legged biddy chicken hatched by one of our own hens. Everybody hereabouts wanted to see that biddy: we charged grownups a nickel, kids two cents. And took in a good twenty dollars before the museum shut down due to the decease of the main attraction.

But one way and another we do each year accumulate Christmas savings, a Fruitcake Fund. These moneys we keep hidden in an ancient bead purse under a loose board under the floor under a chamber pot under my friend's bed. The purse is seldom removed from this safe location except to make a deposit, or, as happens every Saturday, a withdrawal; for on Saturdays I am allowed ten cents to go to the picture show. My friend has never been to a picture show, nor does she intend to: "I'd rather hear you tell the story, Buddy. That way I can imagine it more. Besides, a person my age shouldn't squander their eyes. When the Lord comes, let me see him clear." In addition to never having seen a movie, she has never: eaten in a restaurant, traveled more than five miles from home, received or sent a telegram, read anything except funny papers and the Bible, worn cosmetics, cursed, wished someone harm, told a lie on purpose, let a hungry dog go hungry. Here are a few things she has done, does do: killed with

a hoe the biggest rattlesnake ever seen in this county (sixteen rattles), dip snuff (secretly), tame hummingbirds (just try it) till they balance on her finger, tell ghost stories (we both believe in ghosts) so tingling they chill you in July, talk to herself, take walks in the rain, grow the prettiest japonicas in town, know the recipe for every sort of old-time Indian cure, including a magical wart-remover.

Now, with supper finished, we retire to the room in a faraway part of the house where my friend sleeps in a scrap-quilt-covered iron bed painted rose pink, her favorite color. Silently, wallowing in the pleasures of conspiracy, we take the bead purse from its secret place and spill its contents on the scrap quilt. Dollar bills, tightly rolled and green as May buds. Somber fifty-cent pieces, heavy enough to weight a dead man's eyes. Lovely dimes, the liveliest coin, the one that really jingles. Nickels and quarters, worn smooth as creek pebbles. But mostly a hateful heap of bitter-odored pennies. Last summer others in the house contracted to pay us a penny for every twenty-five flies we killed. Oh, the carnage of August: the flies that flew to heaven! Yet it was not work in which we took pride. And, as we sit counting pennies, it is as though we were back tabulating dead flies. Neither of us has a head for figures; we count slowly, lose track, start again. According to her calculations, we have \$12.73. According to mine, exactly \$13. "I do hope you're wrong, Buddy. We can't mess around with thirteen. The cakes will fall. Or put somebody in the cemetery. Why, I wouldn't dream of getting out of bed on the thirteenth." This is true: she always spends thirteenths in bed. So, to be on the safe side, we subtract a penny and toss it out the window.

Of the ingredients that go into our fruitcakes, whiskey is the most expensive, as well as the hardest to obtain: State laws forbid

its sale. But everybody knows you can buy a bottle from Mr. Haha Jones. And the next day, having completed our more prosaic shopping, we set out for Mr. Haha's business address, a "sinful" (to quote public opinion) fish-fry and dancing café down by the river. We've been there before, and on the same errand; but in previous years our dealings have been with Haha's wife, an iodine-dark Indian woman with braazy peroxidized hair and a dead-tired disposition. Actually, we've never laid eyes on her husband, though we've heard that he's an Indian too. A giant with razor scars across his cheeks. They call him Haha because he's so gloomy, a man who never laughs. As we approach his café (a large log cabin festooned inside and out with chains of garish-gay naked lightbulbs and standing by the river's muddy edge under the shade of river trees where moss drifts through the branches like gray mist) our steps slow down. Even Queenie stops prancing and sticks close by. People have been murdered in Haha's café. Cut to pieces. Hit on the head. There's a case coming up in court next month. Naturally these goings-on happen at night when the colored lights cast crazy patterns and the victrola wails. In the daytime Haha's is shabby and deserted. I knock at the door, Queenie barks, my friend calls: "Mrs. Haha, ma'am? Anyone to home?"

Footsteps. The door opens. Our hearts overturn. It's Mr. Haha Jones himself! And he *is* a giant; he *does* have scars; he *doesn't* smile. No, he glowers at us through Satan-tilted eyes and demands to know: "What you want with Haha?"

For a moment we are too paralyzed to tell. Presently my friend half-finds her voice, a whispery voice at best: "If you please, Mr. Haha, we'd like a quart of your finest whiskey."

His eyes tilt more. Would you believe it? Haha is smiling! Laughing, too. "Which one of you is a drinkin' man?"

"It's for making fruitcakes, Mr. Haha. Cooking."

This sobers him. He frowns. "That's no way to waste good whiskey." Nevertheless, he retreats into the shadowed café and seconds later appears carrying a bottle of daisy yellow unlabeled liquor. He demonstrates its sparkle in the sunlight and says: "Two dollars."

We pay him with nickels and dimes and pennies. Suddenly, jangling the coins in his hand like a fistful of dice, his face softens. "Tell you what," he proposes, pouring the money back into our bead purse, "just send me one of them fruitcakes instead."

"Well," my friend remarks on our way home, "there's a lovely man. We'll put an extra cup of raisins in *his* cake."

The black stove, stoked with coal and firewood, glows like a lighted pumpkin. Eggbeaters whirl, spoons spin round in bowls of butter and sugar, vanilla sweetens the air, ginger spices it, melting, nose-tingling odors saturate the kitchen, suffuse the house, drift out to the world on puffs of chimney smoke. In four days our work is done. Thirty-one cakes, dampened with whiskey, bask on window sills and shelves.

Who are they for?

Friends. Not necessarily neighbor friends: indeed, the larger share are intended for persons we've met maybe once, perhaps not at all. People who've struck our fancy. Like President Roosevelt. Like the Reverend and Mrs. J. C. Lucey, Baptist missionaries to Borneo who lectured here last winter. Or the little knife grinder who comes through town twice a year. Or Abner Packer, the driver of the six o'clock bus from Mobile, who exchanges waves with us every day as he passes in a dust-cloud whoosh. Or the young Wistons, a California couple whose car one afternoon broke down outside the house and who spent a pleasant hour

chatting with us on the porch (young Mr. Wiston snapped our picture, the only one we've ever had taken). Is it because my friend is shy with everyone *except* strangers that these strangers, and merest acquaintances, seem to us our truest friends? I think yes. Also, the scrapbooks we keep of thank-you's on White House stationery, time-to-time communications from California and Borneo, the knife grinder's penny post cards, make us feel connected to eventful worlds beyond the kitchen with its view of a sky that stops.

Now a nude December fig branch grates against the window. The kitchen is empty, the cakes are gone; yesterday we carted the last of them to the post office, where the cost of stamps turned our purse inside out. We're broke. That rather depresses me, but my friend insists on celebrating—with two inches of whiskey left in Haha's bottle. Queenie has a spoonful in a bowl of coffee (she likes her coffee chicory-flavored and strong). The rest we divide between a pair of jelly glasses. We're both quite awed at the prospect of drinking straight whiskey; the taste of it brings screwed-up expressions and sour shudders. But by and by we begin to sing, the two of us singing different songs simultaneously. I don't know the words to mine, just: *Come on along, come on along, to the dark-town strutters' ball*. But I can dance: that's what I mean to be, a tap dancer in the movies. My dancing shadow rollicks on the walls; our voices rock the chinaware; we giggle; as if unseen hands were tickling us. Queenie rolls on her back, her paws plow the air, something like a grin stretches her black lips. Inside myself, I feel warm and sparky as those crumbling logs, carefree as the wind in the chimney. My friend waltzes round the stove, the hem of her poor calico skirt pinched between her fingers as though it were a party dress: *Show me the way to go home, she*

sings, her tennis shoes squeaking on the floor. *Show me the way to go home.*

Enter: two relatives. Very angry. Potent with eyes that scold, tongues that scald. Listen to what they have to say, the words tumbling together into a wrathful tune: "A child of seven! whiskey on his breath! are you out of your mind? feeding a child of seven! must be loony! road to ruination! remember Cousin Kate? Uncle Charlie? Uncle Charlie's brother-in-law? shame! scandal! humiliation! kneel, pray, beg the Lord!"

Queenie sneaks under the stove. My friend gazes at her shoes, her chin quivers, she lifts her skirt and blows her nose and runs to her room. Long after the town has gone to sleep and the house is silent except for the chimings of clocks and the sputter of fading fires, she is weeping into a pillow already as wet as a widow's handkerchief.

"Don't cry," I say, sitting at the bottom of her bed and shivering despite my flannel nightgown that smells of last winter's cough syrup, "don't cry," I beg, teasing her toes, tickling her feet, "you're too old for that."

"It's because," she hiccups, "I *am* too old. Old and funny."

"Not funny. Fun. More fun than anybody. Listen. If you don't stop crying you'll be so tired tomorrow we can't go cut a tree."

She straightens up. Queenie jumps on the bed (where Queenie is not allowed) to lick her cheeks. "I know where we'll find pretty trees, Buddy. And holly, too. With berries big as your eyes. It's way off in the woods. Farther than we've ever been. Papa used to bring us Christmas trees from there: carry them on his shoulder. That's fifty years ago. Well, now: I can't wait for morning."

Morning. Frozen rime lusters the grass; the sun, round as an orange and orange as hot-weather moons, balances on the hori-

zon, burnishes the silvered winter woods. A wild turkey calls. A renegade hog grunts in the undergrowth. Soon, by the edge of knee-deep, rapid-running water, we have to abandon the buggy. Queenie wades the stream first, paddles across barking complaints at the swiftness of the current, the pneumonia-making coldness of it. We follow, holding our shoes and equipment (a hatchet, a burlap sack) above our heads. A mile more: of chastising thorns, burs and briars that catch at our clothes; of rusty pine needles brilliant with gaudy fungus and molted feathers. Here, there, a flash, a flutter, an ecstasy of shrillings remind us that not all the birds have flown south. Always, the path unwinds through lemony sun pools and pitch vine tunnels. Another creek to cross: a disturbed armada of speckled trout froths the water round us, and frogs the size of plates practice belly flops; beaver workmen are building a dam. On the farther shore, Queenie shakes herself and trembles. My friend shivers, too: not with cold but enthusiasm. One of her hat's ragged roses sheds a petal as she lifts her head and inhales the pine-heavy air. "We're almost there; can you smell it, Buddy?" she says, as though we were approaching an ocean.

And, indeed, it is a kind of ocean. Scented acres of holiday trees, prickly-leaved holly. Red berries shiny as Chinese bells: black crows swoop upon them screaming. Having stuffed our burlap sacks with enough greenery and crimson to garland a dozen windows, we set about choosing a tree. "It should be," muses my friend, "twice as tall as a boy. So a boy can't steal the star." The one we pick is twice as tall as me. A brave handsome brute that survives thirty hatchet strokes before it keels with a creaking rending cry. Lugging it like a kill, we commence the long trek out. Every few yards we abandon the struggle, sit down

and pant. But we have the strength of triumphant huntsmen; that and the tree's virile, icy perfume revive us, goad us on. Many compliments accompany our sunset return along the red clay road to town; but my friend is sly and noncommittal when passers-by praise the treasure perched on our buggy: what a fine tree and where did it come from? "Yonderways," she murmurs vaguely. Once a car stops and the rich mill owner's lazy wife leans out and whines: "Giveya two-bits cash for that ol tree." Ordinarily my friend is afraid of saying no; but on this occasion she promptly shakes her head: "We wouldn't take a dollar." The mill owner's wife persists. "A dollar, my foot! Fifty cents. That's my last offer. Goodness, woman, you can get another one." In answer, my friend gently reflects: "I doubt it. There's never two of anything."

Home: Queenie slumps by the fire and sleeps till tomorrow, snoring loud as a human.

A trunk in the attic contains: a shoebox of ermine tails (off the opera cape of a curious lady who once rented a room in the house), coils of frazzled tinsel gone gold with age, one silver star, a brief rope of dilapidated, undoubtedly dangerous candy-like light bulbs. Excellent decorations, as far as they go, which isn't far enough: my friend wants our tree to blaze "like a Baptist window," droop with weighty snows of ornament. But we can't afford the made-in-Japan splendors at the five-and-dime. So we do what we've always done: sit for days at the kitchen table with scissors and crayons and stacks of colored paper. I make sketches and my friend cuts them out: lots of cats, fish too (because they're easy to draw), some apples, some watermelons, a few winged angels devised from saved-up sheets of Hershey-bar tin foil. We

use safety pins to attach these creations to the tree; as a final touch, we sprinkle the branches with shredded cotton (picked in August for this purpose). My friend, surveying the effect, clasps her hands together. "Now honest, Buddy. Doesn't it look good enough to eat?" Queenie tries to eat an angel.

After weaving and ribboning holly wreaths for all the front windows, our next project is the fashioning of family gifts. Tie-dye scarves for the ladies, for the men a home-brewed lemon and licorice and aspirin syrup to be taken "at the first Symptoms of a Cold and after Hunting." But when it comes time for making each other's gift, my friend and I separate to work secretly. I would like to buy her a pearl-handled knife, a radio, a whole pound of chocolate-covered cherries (we tasted some once, and she always swears: "I could live on them, Buddy, Lord yes I could—and that's not taking His name in vain"). Instead, I am building her a kite. She would like to give me a bicycle (she's said so on several million occasions: "If only I could, Buddy. It's bad enough in life to do without something *you* want; but confound it, what gets my goat is not being able to give somebody something you want *them* to have. Only one of these days I will, Buddy. Locate you a bike. Don't ask how. Steal it, maybe"). Instead, I'm fairly certain that she is building me a kite—the same as last year, and the year before: the year before that we exchanged slingshots. All of which is fine by me. For we are champion kite-fliers who study the wind like sailors; my friend, more accomplished than I, can get a kite aloft when there isn't enough breeze to carry clouds.

Christmas Eve afternoon we scrape together a nickel and go to the butcher's to buy Queenie's traditional gift, a good gnawable beef bone. The bone, wrapped in funny paper, is placed high in the tree near the silver star. Queenie knows it's there. She

squats at the foot of the tree staring up in a trance of greed: when bedtime arrives she refuses to budge. Her excitement is equaled by my own. I kick the covers and turn my pillow as though it were a scorching summer's night. Somewhere a rooster crows: falsely, for the sun is still on the other side of the world.

"Buddy, are you awake?" It is my friend, calling from her room, which is next to mine; and an instant later she is sitting on my bed holding a candle. "Well, I can't sleep a hoot," she declares. "My mind's jumping like a jack rabbit. Buddy, do you think Mrs. Roosevelt will serve our cake at dinner?" We huddle in the bed, and she squeezes my hand I-love-you. "Seems like your hand used to be so much smaller. I guess I hate to see you grow up. When you're grown up, will we still be friends?" I say always. "But I feel so bad, Buddy. I wanted so bad to give you a bike. I tried to sell my cameo Papa gave me. Buddy"—she hesitates, as though embarrassed—"I made you another kite." Then I confess that I made her one, too; and we laugh. The candle burns too short to hold. Out it goes, exposing the starlight, the stars spinning at the window like a visible caroling that slowly, slowly daybreak silences. Possibly we doze; but the beginnings of dawn splash us like cold water: we're up, wide-eyed and wandering while we wait for others to waken. Quite deliberately my friend drops a kettle on the kitchen floor. I tap-dance in front of closed doors. One by one the household emerges, looking as though they'd like to kill us both; but it's Christmas, so they can't. First, a gorgeous breakfast: just everything you can imagine—from flapjacks and fried squirrel to hominy grits and honey-in-the-comb. Which puts everyone in a good humor except my friend and I. Frankly, we're so impatient to get at the presents we can't eat a mouthful.

Well, I'm disappointed. Who wouldn't be? With socks, a Sun-

day school shirt, some handkerchiefs, a hand-me-down sweater and a year's subscription to a religious magazine for children. *The Little Shepherd*. It makes me boil. It really does.

My friend has a better haul. A sack of Satsumas, that's her best present. She is proudest, however, of a white wool shawl knitted by her married sister. But she *says* her favorite gift is the kite I built her. And it *is* very beautiful; though not as beautiful as the one she made me, which is blue and scattered with gold and green Good Conduct stars; moreover, my name is painted on it, "Buddy."

"Buddy, the wind is blowing."

The wind is blowing, and nothing will do till we've run to a pasture below the house where Queenie has scooted to bury her bone (and where, a winter hence, Queenie will be buried, too). There, plunging through the healthy waist-high grass, we unreel our kites, feel them twitching at the string like sky fish as they swim into the wind. Satisfied, sun-warmed, we sprawl in the grass and peel Satsumas and watch our kites cavort. Soon I forget the socks and hand-me-down sweater. I'm as happy as if we'd already won the fifty-thousand-dollar Grand Prize in that coffee-naming contest.

"My, how foolish I am!" my friend cries, suddenly alert, like a woman remembering too late she has biscuits in the oven. "You know what I've always thought?" she asks in a tone of discovery, and not smiling at me but a point beyond. "I've always thought a body would have to be sick and dying before they saw the Lord. And I imagined that when He came it would be like looking at the Baptist window: pretty as colored glass with the sun pouring through, such a shine you don't know it's getting dark. And it's been a comfort: to think of that shine taking away all the spooky feeling. But I'll wager it never happens. I'll wager at the very end

a body realizes the Lord has already shown Himself. That things as they are"—her hand circles in a gesture that gathers clouds and kites and grass and Queenie pawing earth over her bone—"just what they've always seen, was seeing Him. As for me, I could leave the world with today in my eyes."

This is our last Christmas together.

Life separates us. Those who Know Best decide that I belong in a military school. And so follows a miserable succession of bugle-blowing prisons, grim reveille-ridden summer camps. I have a new home too. But it doesn't count. Home is where my friend is, and there I never go.

And there she remains, puttering around the kitchen. Alone with Queenie. Then alone. ("Buddy dear," she writes in her wild hard-to-read script, "yesterday Jim Macy's horse kicked Queenie bad. Be thankful she didn't feel much. I wrapped her in a Fine Linen sheet and rode her in the buggy down to Simpson's pasture where she can be with all her Bones...") For a few Novembers she continues to bake her fruitcakes single-handed; not as many, but some: and, of course, she always sends me "the best of the batch." Also, in every letter she encloses a dime wadded in toilet paper: "See a picture show and write me the story." But gradually in her letters she tends to confuse me with her other friend, the Buddy who died in the 1880's; more and more thirteenth days are not the only days she stays in bed: a morning arrives in November, a leafless birdless coming of winter morning, when she cannot rouse herself to exclaim: "Oh my, it's fruitcake weather!"

And when that happens, I know it. A message saying so merely confirms a piece of news some secret vein had already received,

severing from me an irreplaceable part of myself, letting it loose like a kite on a broken string. That is why, walking across a school campus on this particular December morning, I keep searching the sky. As if I expected to see, rather like hearts, a lost pair of kites hurrying toward heaven.

TRUMAN CAPOTE

THE COMPLETE
STORIES



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NEW YORK

ONE CHRISTMAS

(1982)

for Gloria Dunphy

First, a brief autobiographical prologue. My mother, who was exceptionally intelligent, was the most beautiful girl in Alabama. Everyone said so, and it was true; and when she was sixteen she married a twenty-eight-year-old businessman who came from a good New Orleans family. The marriage lasted a year. My mother was too young to be a mother or a wife; she was also too ambitious—she wanted to go to college and to have a career. So she left her husband; and as for what to do with me, she deposited me in the care of her large Alabama family.

Over the years, I seldom saw either of my parents. My father was occupied in New Orleans, and my mother, after graduating from college, was making a success for herself in New York. So far as I was concerned, this was not an unpleasant situation. I was happy where I was. I had many kindly relatives, aunts and uncles and cousins, particularly *one* cousin, an elderly, white-haired, slightly crippled woman named Sook. Miss Sook Faulk. I had other friends, but she was by far my best friend.

It was Sook who told me about Santa Claus, his flowing beard, his red suit, his jangling present-filled sled, and I believed her, just as I believed that everything was God's will, or the Lord's, as

Sook always called Him. If I stubbed my toe, or fell off a horse, or caught a good-sized fish at the creek—well, good or bad, it was all the Lord's will. And that was what Sook said when she received the frightening news from New Orleans: My father wanted me to travel there to spend Christmas with him.

I cried. I didn't want to go. I'd never left this small, isolated Alabama town surrounded by forests and farms and rivers. I'd never gone to sleep without Sook combing her fingers through my hair and kissing me good-night. Then, too, I was afraid of strangers, and my father was a stranger. I had seen him several times, but the memory was a haze; I had no idea what he was like. But, as Sook said: "It's the Lord's will. And who knows, Buddy, maybe you'll see snow."

Snow! Until I could read myself, Sook read me many stories, and it seemed a lot of snow was in almost all of them. Drifting, dazzling fairytale flakes. It was something I dreamed about; something magical and mysterious that I wanted to see and feel and touch. Of course I never had, and neither had Sook; how could we, living in a hot place like Alabama? I don't know why she thought I would see snow in New Orleans, for New Orleans is even hotter. Never mind. She was just trying to give me courage to make the trip.

I had a new suit. It had a card pinned to the lapel with my name and address. That was in case I got lost. You see, I had to make the trip alone. By bus. Well, everybody thought I'd be safe with my tag. Everybody but me. I was scared to death; and angry. Furious at my father, this stranger, who was forcing me to leave home and be away from Sook at Christmastime.

It was a four-hundred-mile trip, something like that. My first stop was in Mobile. I changed buses there, and rode along for-

ever and forever through swampy lands and along seacoasts until we arrived in a loud city tinkling with trolley cars and packed with dangerous foreign-looking people.

That was New Orleans.

And suddenly, as I stepped off the bus, a man swept me in his arms, squeezed the breath out of me; he was laughing, he was crying—a tall, good-looking man, laughing and crying. He said: "Don't you know me? Don't you know your daddy?"

I was speechless. I didn't say a word until at last, while we were riding along in a taxi, I asked: "Where is it?"

"Our house? It's not far—"

"Not the house. The snow."

"What snow?"

"I thought there would be a lot of snow."

He looked at me strangely, but laughed. "There never has been any snow in New Orleans. Not that I heard of. But listen. Hear that thunder? It's sure going to rain!"

I don't know what scared me most, the thunder, the sizzling zigzags of lightning that followed it—or my father. That night, when I went to bed, it was still raining. I said my prayers and prayed that I would soon be home with Sook. I didn't know how I could ever go to sleep without Sook to kiss me good-night. The fact was, I couldn't go to sleep, so I began to wonder what Santa Claus would bring me. I wanted a pearl-handled knife. And a big set of jigsaw puzzles. A cowboy hat with matching lasso. And a B.B. rifle to shoot sparrows. (Years later, when I did have a B.B. gun, I shot a mockingbird and a bobwhite, and I can never forget the regret I felt, the grief, I never killed another thing, and every fish I caught I threw back into the water.) And I wanted a box of crayons. And, most of all, a radio but I knew that was impossible:

I didn't know ten people who had radios. Remember, this was the Depression, and in the Deep South houses furnished with radios or refrigerators were rare.

My father had both. He seemed to have everything—a car with a rumble seat, not to mention an old, pink pretty little house in the French Quarter with iron-lace balconies and a secret patio garden colored with flowers and cooled by a fountain shaped like a mermaid. He also had a half-dozen, I'd say full-dozen, lady friends. Like my mother, my father had not remarried; but they both had determined admirers and, willingly or not, eventually walked the path to the altar—in fact, my father walked it six times.

So you can see he must have had charm; and, indeed, he seemed to charm most people—everybody except me. That was because he embarrassed me so, always hauling me around to meet his friends, everybody from his banker to the barber who shaved him every day. And, of course, all his lady friends. And the worst part: All the time he was hugging and kissing me and bragging about me. I felt so ashamed. First of all, there was nothing to brag about. I was a real country boy. I believed in Jesus, and faithfully said my prayers. I knew Santa Claus existed. And at home in Alabama, except to go to church, I never wore shoes; winter or summer.

It was pure torture, being pulled along the streets of New Orleans in those tightly laced, hot as hell, heavy as lead shoes. I don't know what was worse—the shoes or the food. Back home I was used to fried chicken and collard greens and butter beans and corn bread and other comforting things. But these New Orleans restaurants! I will never forget my first oyster, it was like a bad dream sliding down my throat; decades passed before I swallowed another. As for all that spicy Creole cookery—just to

think of it gave me heartburn. No sir, I hankered after biscuits right from the stove and milk fresh from the cows and home-made molasses straight from the bucket.

My poor father had no idea how miserable I was, partly because I never let him see it, certainly never told him; and partly because, despite my mother's protest, he had managed to get legal custody of me for this Christmas holiday.

He would say: "Tell the truth. Don't you want to come and live here with me in New Orleans?"

"I can't."

"What do you mean you can't?"

"I miss Sook. I miss Queenie; we have a little rat terrier, a funny little thing. But we both love her."

He said: "Don't you love me?"

I said: "Yes." But the truth was, except for Sook and Queenie and a few cousins and a picture of my beautiful mother beside my bed, I had no real idea of what love meant.

I soon found out. The day before Christmas, as we were walking along Canal Street, I stopped dead still, mesmerized by a magical object that I saw in the window of a big toy store. It was a model airplane large enough to sit in and pedal like a bicycle. It was green and had a red propeller. I was convinced that if you pedaled fast enough it would take off and fly! Now wouldn't that be something! I could just see my cousins standing on the ground while I flew about among the clouds. Talk about green! I laughed; and laughed and laughed. It was the first thing I'd done that made my father look confident, even though he didn't know what I thought was so funny.

That night I prayed that Santa Claus would bring me the airplane.

My father had already bought a Christmas tree, and we spent

a great deal of time at the five 'n' dime picking out things to decorate it with. Then I made a mistake. I put a picture of my mother under the tree. The moment my father saw it he turned white and began to tremble. I didn't know what to do. But he did. He went to a cabinet and took out a tall glass and a bottle. I recognized the bottle because all my Alabama uncles had plenty just like it. Prohibition moonshine. He filled the tall glass and drank it with hardly a pause. After that, it was as though the picture had vanished.

And so I awaited Christmas Eve, and the always exciting advent of fat Santa. Of course, I had never seen a weighted, jangling, belly-swollen giant flop down a chimney and gaily dispense his largesse under a Christmas tree. My cousin Billy Bob, who was a mean little runt but had a brain like a fist made of iron, said it was a lot of hooey, there was no such creature.

"My foot!" he said. "Anybody would believe there was any Santa Claus would believe a mule was a horse." This quarrel took place in the tiny courthouse square. I said: "*There is a Santa Claus because what he does is the Lord's will and whatever is the Lord's will is the truth.*" And Billy Bob, spitting on the ground, walked away: "Well, looks like we've got another preacher on our hands."

I always swore I'd never go to sleep on Christmas Eve, I wanted to hear the prancing dance of reindeer on the roof, and to be right there at the foot of the chimney to shake hands with Santa Claus. And on this particular Christmas Eve, nothing, it seemed to me, could be easier than staying awake.

My father's house had three floors and seven rooms, several of them huge, especially the three leading to the patio garden: a parlor, a dining room and a "musical" room for those who liked to dance and play and deal cards. The two floors above were trimmed with lacy balconies whose dark green iron intricacies

were delicately entwined with bougainvillea and rippling vines of scarlet spider orchids—a plant that resembles lizards flicking their red tongues. It was the kind of house best displayed by lacquered floors and some wicker here, some velvet there. It could have been mistaken for the house of a rich man; rather, it was the place of a man with an appetite for elegance. To a poor (but happy) barefoot boy from Alabama it was a mystery how he managed to satisfy that desire.

But it was no mystery to my mother, who, having graduated from college, was putting her magnolia delights to full use while struggling to find in New York a truly suitable fiancé who could afford Sutton Place apartments and sable coats. No, my father's resources were familiar to her, though she never mentioned the matter until many years later, long after she had acquired ropes of pearls to glisten around her sable-wrapped throat.

She had come to visit me in a snobbish New England boarding school (where my tuition was paid by her rich and generous husband), when something I said tossed her into a rage; she shouted: "So you don't know how he lives so well? Charters yachts and cruises the Greek Islands? His *wives!* Think of the whole long string of them. All widows. All rich. *Very* rich. And all much older than he. Too old for any sane young man to marry. That's why you are his only child. And that's why I'll never have another child—I was too young to have any babies, but he was a beast, he wrecked me, he ruined me—"

Just a gigolo, everywhere I go, people stop and stare... Moon, moon over Miami... This is my first affair, so please be kind... Hey, mister, can you spare a dime?... Just a gigolo, everywhere I go, people stop and stare...

All the while she talked (and I tried not to listen, because by telling me my birth had destroyed her, *she* was destroying me),

these tunes ran through my head, or tunes like them. They helped me not to hear her, and they reminded me of the strange haunting party my father had given in New Orleans that Christmas Eve.

The patio was filled with candles, and so were the three rooms leading off it. Most of the guests were gathered in the parlor, where a subdued fire in the fireplace made the Christmas tree glitter; but many others were dancing in the music room and the patio to music from a wind-up Victrola. After I had been introduced to the guests, and been made much of, I had been sent upstairs; but from the terrace outside my French-shuttered bedroom door, I could watch all the party, see all the couples dancing. I watched my father waltz a graceful lady around the pool that surrounded the mermaid fountain. She *was* graceful, and dressed in a wispy silver dress that shimmered in the candlelight; but she was old—at least ten years older than my father, who was then thirty-five.

I suddenly realized my father was by far the youngest person at his party. None of the ladies, charming as they were, were any younger than the willowy waltzer in the floating silver dress. It was the same with the men, so many of whom were smoking sweet-smelling Havana cigars; more than half of them were old enough to be my father's father.

Then I saw something that made me blink. My father and his agile partner had danced themselves into a niche shadowed by scarlet spider orchids; and they were embracing, kissing. I was so startled, I was so *irate*, I ran into my bedroom, jumped into bed and pulled the covers over my head. What would my nice-looking young father want with an old woman like that! And why didn't all those people downstairs go home so Santa Claus could come? I lay awake for hours listening to them leave, and when

my father said good-bye for the last time, I heard him climb the stairs and open my door to peek at me; but I pretended to be asleep.

Several things occurred that kept me awake the whole night. First, the footfalls, the noise of my father running up and down the stairs, breathing heavily. I had to see what he was up to. So I hid on the balcony among the bougainvillea. From there, I had a complete view of the parlor and the Christmas tree and the fireplace where a fire still palely burned. Moreover, I could see my father. He was crawling around under the tree arranging a pyramid of packages. Wrapped in purple paper, and red and gold and white and blue, they rustled as he moved them about. I felt dizzy, for what I saw forced me to reconsider everything. If these were presents intended for me, then obviously they had not been ordered by the Lord and delivered by Santa Claus; no, they were gifts bought and wrapped by my father. Which meant that my rotten little cousin Billy Bob and other rotten kids like him weren't lying when they taunted me and told me there was no Santa Claus. The worst thought was: Had Sook known the truth, and lied to me? No, Sook would never lie to me. She *believed*. It was just that—well, though she was sixty-something, in some ways she was at least as much of a child as I was.

I watched until my father had finished his chores and blown out the few candles that still burned. I waited until I was sure he was in bed and sound asleep. Then I crept downstairs to the parlor, which still reeked of gardenias and Havana cigars.

I sat there, thinking: Now I will have to be the one to tell Sook the truth. An anger, a weird malice was spiraling inside me: It was not directed toward my father, though he turned out to be its victim.

When the dawn came, I examined the tags attached to each of

the packages. They all said: "For Buddy." All but one, which said: "For Evangeline." Evangeline was an elderly colored woman who drank Coca-Cola all day long and weighed three hundred pounds; she was my father's housekeeper—she also mothered him. I decided to open the packages: It was Christmas morning, I was awake, so why not? I won't bother to describe what was inside them: just shirts and sweaters and dull stuff like that. The only thing I appreciated was a quite snazzy cap-pistol. Somehow I got the idea it would be fun to waken my father by firing it. So I did. *Bang. Bang. Bang.*

He raced out of his room, wild-eyed.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

"Buddy—what the hell do you think you're doing?"

Bang. Bang. Bang.

"Stop that!"

I laughed. "Look, Daddy. Look at all the wonderful things Santa Claus brought me."

Calm now, he walked into the parlor and hugged me. "You like what Santa Claus brought you?"

I smiled at him. He smiled at me. There was a tender lingering moment, shattered when I said: "Yes. But what are *you* going to give me, Daddy?" His smile evaporated. His eyes narrowed suspiciously—you could see that he thought I was pulling some kind of stunt. But then he blushed, as though he was ashamed to be thinking what he was thinking. He patted my head, and coughed and said: "Well, I thought I'd wait and let you pick out something you wanted. Is there anything particular you want?"

I reminded him of the airplane we had seen in the toy store on Canal Street. His face sagged. Oh, yes, he remembered the airplane and how expensive it was. Nevertheless, the next day I was sitting in that airplane dreaming I was zooming toward heaven

while my father wrote out a check for a happy salesman. There had been some argument about shipping the plane to Alabama, but I was adamant—I insisted it should go with me on the bus that I was taking at two o'clock that afternoon. The salesman settled it by calling the bus company, who said that they could handle the matter easily.

But I wasn't free of New Orleans yet. The problem was a large silver flask of moonshine; maybe it was because of my departure, but anyway my father had been swilling it all day, and on the way to the bus station, he scared me by grabbing my wrist and harshly whispering: "I'm not going to let you go. I can't let you go back to that crazy family in that crazy old house. Just look at what they've done to you. A boy six, almost seven, talking about Santa Claus! It's all their fault, all those sour old spinsters with their Bibles and their knitting needles, those drunken uncles. *Listen* to me, Buddy. There is no God! There *is* no Santa Claus." He was squeezing my wrist so hard that it ached. "Sometimes, oh, God, I think your mother and I, the both of us, we ought to kill ourselves to have let this happen—" (He never killed himself, but my mother did: She walked down the Seconal road thirty years ago.) "Kiss me. Please. Please. Kiss me. Tell your daddy that you love him." But I couldn't speak. I was terrified I was going to miss my bus. And I was worried about my plane, which was strapped to the top of the taxi. "Say it: 'I love you.' Say it. Please. Buddy. Say it."

It was lucky for me that our taxi-driver was a good-hearted man. Because if it hadn't been for his help, and the help of some efficient porters and a friendly policeman, I don't know what would have happened when we reached the station. My father was so wobbly he could hardly walk, but the policeman talked to him, quieted him down, helped him to stand straight, and the

taxi-man promised to take him safely home. But my father would not leave until he had seen the porters put me on the bus.

Once I was on the bus, I crouched in a seat and shut my eyes. I felt the strangest pain. A crushing pain that hurt everywhere. I thought if I took off my heavy city shoes, those crucifying monsters, the agony would ease. I took them off, but the mysterious pain did not leave me. In a way it never has; never will.

Twelve hours later I was home in bed. The room was dark. Sook was sitting beside me, rocking in a rocking chair, a sound as soothing as ocean waves. I had tried to tell her everything that had happened, and only stopped when I was hoarse as a howling dog. She stroked her fingers through my hair, and said: "Of course there is a Santa Claus. It's just that no single somebody could do all he has to do. So the Lord has spread the task among us all. That's why everybody is Santa Claus. I am. You are. Even your cousin Billy Bob. Now go to sleep. Count stars. Think of the quietest thing. Like snow. I'm sorry you didn't get to see any. But now snow is falling through the stars—" Stars sparkled, snow whirled inside my head; the last thing I remembered was the peaceful voice of the Lord telling me something I must do. And the next day I did it. I went with Sook to the post office and bought a penny postcard. That same postcard exists today. It was found in my father's safety deposit box when he died last year. Here is what I had written him: *Hello pop hope you are well I am and I am lurning to pedel my plain so fast I will soon be in the sky so keep your eyes open and yes I love you Buddy.*

THE CHRISTMAS MIRACLE OF JONATHAN TOOMEY

SUSAN WOJCIECHOWSKI
ILLUSTRATED BY P.J. LYNCH





THE
CHRISTMAS
MIRACLE
— OF —
JONATHAN
TOOMEY



SUSAN
WOJCIECHOWSKI

ILLUSTRATED BY
P.J. LYNCH



THE VILLAGE CHILDREN
CALLED HIM MR. GLOOMY.

But, in fact, his name was Toomey, Mr. Jonathan Toomey. And though it's not kind to call people names, this one fit quite well. For Jonathan Toomey seldom smiled and never laughed. He went about mumbling and grumbling, muttering and sputtering, grumping and griping. He complained that the church bells rang too often, that the birds sang too shrilly, that the children played too loudly.



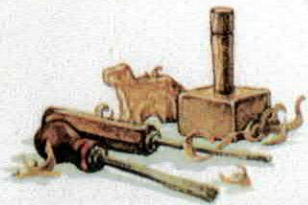
The village people didn't know it, but there was a reason for his gloom, a reason for his grumbling, a reason why he walked hunched over, as if carrying a great weight on his shoulders. Some years earlier, when Jonathan Toomey was young and full of life and full of love, his wife and baby had become very sick. And, because those were the days before hospitals and medicines and skilled doctors, his wife and baby died, three days apart from each other.

So Jonathan Toomey had packed his belongings into a wagon and traveled till his tears stopped. He settled into a tiny house at the edge of a village to do his woodcarving.



Mr. Toomey was a woodcarver. Some said he was the best woodcarver in the whole valley. He spent his days sitting at a workbench carving beautiful shapes from blocks of pine and hickory and chestnut wood. After supper, he sat in a straight-backed chair near the fireplace, smoking his pipe and staring into the flames.

Jonathan Toomey wasn't an old man, but if you saw him, you might think he was, the way he walked bent forward with his head down. You wouldn't notice his eyes, the clear blue of an August sky. And you wouldn't see the dimple on his chin, since his face was mostly hidden under a shaggy, untrimmed beard, speckled with sawdust and wood shavings and, depending what he ate that day, with crumbs of bread or a bit of potato or dried gravy.



One day in early December, there was a knock at Jonathan's door. Mumbling and grumbling, he went to answer it. There stood a woman and a young boy.

"I'm the widow McDowell. I'm new in your village. This is my son Thomas," the woman said.

"I'm seven and I know how to whistle," said Thomas.

"Whistling is pish-posh," said the woodcarver gruffly.

"I need something carved," said the woman, and she told Jonathan about a very special set of Christmas figures her grandfather had carved for her when she was a girl.

"After I moved here, I discovered that they were lost," she explained. "I had hoped that by some miracle I would find them again, but it hasn't happened."

"There are no such things as miracles," the woodcarver told her. "Now, could you describe the figures for me?"

"There were sheep," she told him.

"Two of them, with curly wool," added Thomas.

"Yes, two," said the widow, "and a cow, an angel, Mary, Joseph, the baby Jesus, and the wise men."

"Three of them," added Thomas.

"Will you take the job?" asked the widow McDowell.

"I will."

"I'm grateful. How soon can you have them ready?"

"They will be ready when they are ready," he said.

"But I must have them by Christmas. They mean very much to me. I can't remember a Christmas without them."

"Christmas is pish-posh," said Jonathan gruffly, and he shut the door.



The following week there was a knock at the woodcarver's door. Muttering and sputtering, he went to answer it. There stood the widow McDowell and Thomas.

"Excuse me," said the widow, "but Thomas has been begging to come and watch you work. He says he wants to be a woodcarver when he grows up and would like to watch you since you are the best in the valley."

"I'll be quiet. You won't even know I'm here. Please, please," piped in Thomas.

With a grumble, the woodcarver stepped aside to let them in. He pointed to a stool near his workbench. "No talking, no jiggling, no noise," he ordered Thomas.

The widow McDowell handed Mr. Toomey a warm loaf of corn bread as a token of thanks. Then she took out her knitting and sat down in a rocking chair in the far corner of the cottage.

"Not there!" bellowed the woodcarver. "No one sits in that chair." So she moved to the straight-backed chair by the fire.





Thomas sat very still. Once, when he needed to sneeze, he pressed a finger under his nose to hold it back. Once, when he wanted desperately to scratch his leg, he counted to twenty to keep his mind off the itch.

After a very long time, Thomas cleared his throat and whispered, "Mr. Toomey, may I ask a question?"

The woodcarver glared at Thomas, then shrugged his shoulders and grunted. Thomas decided it meant "yes," so he went on. "Is that my sheep you're carving?"

The woodcarver nodded and grunted again.

After another very long time, Thomas whispered, "Mr. Toomey, excuse me, but you're carving my sheep wrong."

The widow McDowell's knitting needles stopped clicking. Jonathan Toomey's knife stopped carving. Thomas went on. "It's a beautiful sheep, nice and curly, but my sheep looked happy."

"That's pish-posh," said Mr. Toomey. "Sheep are sheep. They cannot look happy."

"Mine did," answered Thomas. "They knew they were with the baby Jesus, so they were happy."

After that, Thomas was quiet for the rest of the afternoon. When the church bells chimed six o'clock, Mr. Toomey grumbled under his breath about the awful noise. The widow McDowell said it was time to leave. Thomas sneezed three times, then thanked the woodcarver for allowing him to watch.

That evening, after a supper of corn bread and boiled potatoes, the woodcarver sat down at his bench. He picked up his knife. He picked up the sheep. He worked until his eyelids drooped shut.



A few days later there was a knock at the woodcarver's door. Griping and grumbling, he went to answer it. There stood the widow and her son.

"May I watch again? I will be quiet," said Thomas.

He settled himself on the stool very quietly, while his mother laid a basket of sweet-smelling raisin buns on the table.

"The teapot is warm," Mr. Toomey said gruffly, his head bent over his work.

While Mr. Toomey carved, the widow McDowell poured tea. She touched the woodcarver gently on the shoulder and placed a cup of tea and a bun next to him. He pretended not to notice, but soon, both the plate and the cup were empty.

Thomas tried to eat the bun his mother had given him as quietly as he could. But it is almost impossible to be seven and eat a warm sticky raisin bun without making various smacking, licking, satisfied noises.

When Thomas had finished, he tried to sit quietly. Once, he almost hiccupped, but he took a deep breath and held it till his face turned red. And once, without thinking, he began to swing his legs, but a glare from the woodcarver stopped him and he kept them so still they fell asleep.



A few days later there was a knock on the woodcarver's door. He smoothed down his hair as he went to answer it. At the door were the widow and her son.

"May I watch again?" asked Thomas.

As Mrs. McDowell warmed the tea and put a plate of fresh molasses cookies on the workbench, Thomas watched the woodcarver work on the figure of an angel.

After a very long time, Thomas spoke. "Mr. Toomey, excuse me, is that my angel you're carving?"

"Yes. And would you do me the favor of telling me exactly what I'm doing wrong?"

"Well, my angel looked like one of God's most important angels, because it was sent to Baby Jesus."

"And just how does one make an angel look important?" asked the woodcarver.

"You'll be able to do it," said Thomas. "You are the best woodcarver in the valley."

After another very long time, Thomas spoke. "Mr. Toomey, excuse me, may I ask a question?"

"Do you ever stop talking?" asked the woodcarver.

"My mother says I don't. She says I could learn about the virtue of silence from you."

Under his beard, the woodcarver's face turned pink. The widow McDowell's face turned as red as the scarf she was knitting.

"Well, speak up, what is your question?"

"Will you please teach me to carve?"

"I am a very busy man," grumbled the woodcarver. But he put down the important angel. "You will carve a bird."

"A robin, I hope," said Thomas. "I like robins."





After a very long time, Thomas whispered, "Mr. Toomey, excuse me, may I ask a question?"

Grunt.

"Is that my cow you're carving?"

Nod and grunt.

Another very long time went by. Then Thomas cleared his throat and said, "Mr. Toomey, excuse me, but I must tell you something. That is a beautiful cow, the most beautiful cow I have ever seen, but it's not right. My cow looked proud."

"That's pish-posh," growled the woodcarver. "Cows are cows. They cannot look proud."

"My cow did. It knew that Jesus chose to be born in its barn, so it was proud."

Thomas was quiet for the rest of the afternoon. The only sounds that could be heard were the scraping of the carving knife, the humming of the widow McDowell, and the *click-click* of her knitting needles.

When the church bells chimed six o'clock, Mr. Toomey muttered under his breath about the noise. The widow McDowell said it was time to leave. Thomas shook first one leg, then the other. He thanked the woodcarver for allowing him to watch.

That evening, after a supper of boiled potatoes and raisin buns, the woodcarver sat down at his bench. He picked up his carving knife. He picked up the cow. He worked until his eyelids drooped shut.





With a piece of charcoal, the woodcarver sketched a robin on a piece of brown paper. He handed Thomas a small block of pine and a knife. He showed him how to lop the corners from the block and slowly smooth the edges of the wood into curves.

Thomas copied the woodcarver's strokes, head bent, tongue working from side to side of his lower lip as he concentrated.

When the church bells chimed six o'clock, Jonathan Toomey was holding Thomas's hand in his, guiding the knife along the edge of a wing. He didn't hear them ringing. The widow McDowell said it was time to leave. Thomas brushed wood shavings from his shirt. Then he reached out and brushed two especially large pieces of wood shaving from Jonathan Toomey's beard. He thanked the woodcarver for teaching him how to carve.

Later, after a supper of boiled potatoes and molasses cookies, Jonathan Toomey went to his workbench. He thought for a long time. He sketched drawing after drawing. Finally he picked up his carving knife. He picked up the angel. He carved until his eyelids drooped shut.





A few days later there was a knock on the woodcarver's door. Mr. Toomey jumped up to answer it.

There stood the widow McDowell with a bouquet of pine boughs and holly sprigs, dotted with berries. And there stood Thomas, clutching his partly carved robin.

While Thomas and Mr. Toomey carved, Mrs. McDowell put the bouquet in a jar of water. She scrubbed Mr. Toomey's kitchen table and set the jar in the center, on a pretty cloth embroidered with lilies of the valley and daisies, which she found in a drawer below the cupboard.

"Next, I will carve the wise men and Joseph," the woodcarver said to Thomas. "Perhaps, before I begin, you will tell me about all the mistakes I am going to make."

"Well," said Thomas, "my wise men were wearing their most wonderful robes because they were going to visit Jesus, and my Joseph was leaning over Baby Jesus like he was protecting him. He looked very serious."

It wasn't until the church bells had chimed and the widow and her son were preparing to go that Mr. Toomey saw the jar of pine boughs and the scrubbed table and the cloth embroidered with lilies of the valley and daisies.

"I found the cloth in a drawer. I thought it would look pretty on the table," the widow McDowell said, smiling.

"Never open that drawer," the woodcarver said harshly. When the two had left, Jonathan put the cloth away.

That evening, after a supper of boiled potatoes, the woodcarver worked on Joseph and the wise men until his eyelids drooped shut.



A few days later there was a knock on the woodcarver's door. He dusted the crumbs from his beard and brushed the sawdust from his shirt. At the door were the widow McDowell and Thomas.

All afternoon Thomas watched the woodcarver work. When it was time to leave, Jonathan said to Thomas, "I am about to begin the last two figures—Mary and the baby. Can you tell me how your figures looked?"

"They were the most special of all," said Thomas. "Jesus was smiling and reaching up to his mother and Mary looked like she loved him very much."

"Thank you, Thomas," said the woodcarver.

"Tomorrow is Christmas. Is there any chance the figures will be ready?" the widow McDowell asked.

"They will be ready when they are ready."

"I understand," said the widow, and she handed Jonathan two packages. "Merry Christmas," she said.

Jonathan folded his arms across his chest. "I want no presents," he said harshly.

"That is exactly why we are giving them," answered the widow. She put them down on the table and left.

Jonathan sat down at the table. Slowly, he opened the first package. Inside was a red scarf, hand-knit, warm and bright. He tied the scarf around his neck.

The other package held a robin, crudely carved of pine. A smile twitched at the corners of Jonathan's mouth as he ran his fingers over the lopsided wings. He dusted the fireplace mantel with his sleeve and placed the robin exactly in the center, so he could look at it from his chair.



The woodcarver did not eat supper that day. Instead he began to sketch the final figures, Mary and Jesus. He drew Mary, then wadded the sketch into a ball and tossed it on the floor. He drew the baby, wadded the sketch into a ball and tossed it with the first. He sketched again. Once more he crumpled the paper. Soon there was a small mountain of crumpled papers at his feet. He picked up a block of wood and tried to carve, but his knife would not do what he wanted it to do. He hurled the chunk of wood into the fireplace and sat, staring into the flames.

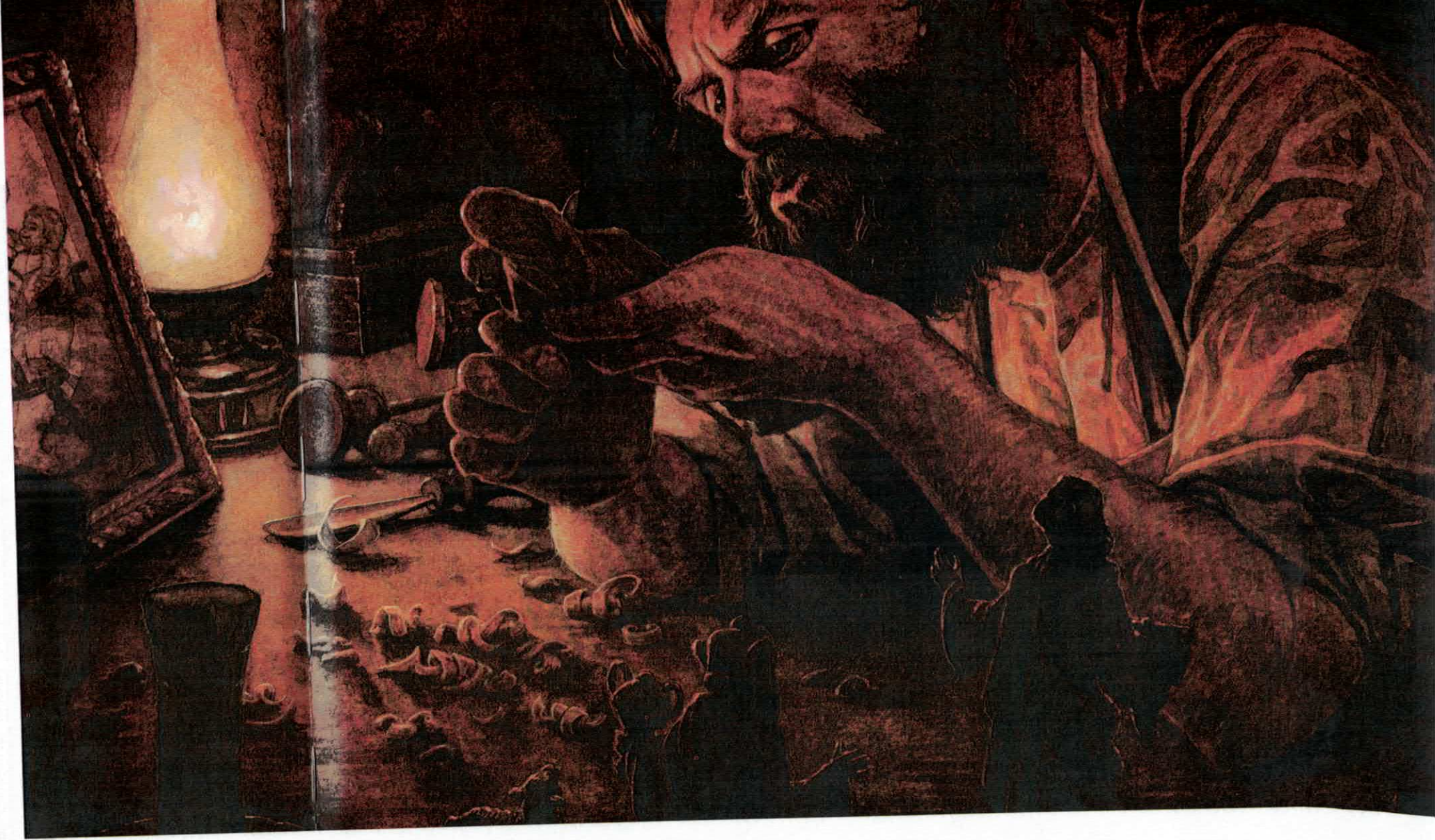


When he heard the church bells announcing the midnight Christmas service, he got up. Slowly he opened the drawer beneath the cupboard, the drawer he had told the widow never to open.

From it he took the cloth embroidered with lilies of the valley and daisies. He took out a rough woolen shawl and a lace handkerchief. He took out a tiny white baby blanket and a little pair of blue socks. He placed each piece gently on the floor. From the bottom of the drawer he lifted out a picture frame, beautifully carved of deep brown chestnut wood.

In the frame was a charcoal sketch of a woman sitting in a rocking chair, holding a baby. The baby's arms were reaching up, touching the woman's face. The woman was looking down at the baby, smiling. Jonathan sat down in his rocking chair and held the picture against his chest. He rocked slowly, his eyes closed. Two tears trailed into his beard.

When he finally took the picture to his workbench and began to carve, his fingers worked quickly and surely. He carved all through the night.



The next day, there was a knock on the widow McDowell's door.

When she opened it, there stood the woodcarver, his neck wrapped in a red scarf, holding a wooden box stuffed with straw.

"Mr. Toomey!" said the widow. "What a surprise. Merry Christmas."

"The figures are ready," he said as he stepped inside.

From the box, Jonathan unpacked two curly sheep, happy sheep because they were with Jesus. He unpacked a proud cow and an angel, a very important angel with mighty wings stretching from its shoulders right down to the hem of its gown. He unpacked three wise men wearing their most wonderful robes, edged with fur and falling in rich folds.

He unpacked a serious and caring Joseph. He unpacked Mary wearing a rough woolen shawl, looking down, loving her precious baby son. Jesus was smiling and reaching up to touch his mother's face.



That day, Jonathan went to the Christmas service with the widow McDowell and Thomas. And that day in the churchyard the village children saw Jonathan throw back his head, showing his eyes as clear as an August sky, and laugh. No one ever called him Mr. Gloomy again.

