



Christmas in the heart

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A coincidence?

Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again (Luke 6:38, KJV).

I was very proud of my daughter Emily. At only nine years old, she had been carefully saving her allowance money all year and trying to earn extra money by doing small jobs around the neighborhood. Emily was determined to save enough to buy a girl's mountain bike, an item for which she'd been longing, and she'd been faithfully putting her money away since the beginning of the year.

"How're you doing, Honey?" I asked soon after Thanksgiving. I knew she had hoped to have all the money she needed by the end of the year.

"I have forty-nine dollars, Daddy," she said. "I'm not sure if I'm going to make it."



"You've worked so hard," I said encouragingly. "Keep it up. But you know that you can have your pick from my bicycle collection."

"Thanks, Daddy. But your bikes are so old."

I smiled to myself because I knew she was right. As a collector of vintage bicycles, all my girls' bikes were 1950s models--not the kind a kid would choose today.

When the Christmas season arrived, Emily and I went comparison shopping, and she saw several less expensive bikes for which she thought she'd have to settle. As we left one store, she noticed a Salvation Army volunteer ringing his bell by a big kettle. "Can we give them something, Daddy?" she asked.

"Sorry, Em, I'm out of change," I replied.

Emily continued to work hard all through December, and it seemed she might make her goal after all. Then suddenly one day, she came downstairs to the kitchen and made an announcement to her mother.

"Mom," she said hesitantly, "you know all the money I've been saving?"

"Yes, dear," smiled my wife Diane.

"God told me to give it to the poor people."

Diane knelt down to Emily's level. "That's a very kind thought, sweetheart. But you've been saving all year. Maybe you could give some of it."

Emily shook her head vigorously. "God said all."

When we saw she was serious, we gave her various suggestions about where she could contribute. But Emily had received specific instructions, and so one cold Sunday morning before Christmas, with little fanfare, she handed her total savings of \$58 to a surprised and grateful Salvation Army volunteer.



Moved by Emily's selflessness, I suddenly noticed that a local car dealer was collecting used bicycles to refurbish and give to poor children for Christmas. And I realized that if my nine-year-old daughter could give away all her money, I could certainly give up one bike from my collection.

As I picked up a shiny but old-fashioned kid's bike from the line in the garage, it seemed as if a second bicycle in the line took on a glow. Should I give a second bike? No, certainly the one would be enough.

But as I got to my car, I couldn't shake the feeling that I should donate that second bike as well. And if Emily could follow heavenly instructions, I decided I could, too. I turned back and loaded the second bike into the trunk, then took off for the dealership.

When I delivered the bikes, the car dealer thanked me and said, "You're making two kids very happy, Mr. Koper. And here are your tickets."

"Tickets?" I asked.

"Yes. For each bike donated, we're giving away one chance to win a brand new men's 21-speed mountain bike from a local bike shop. So here are your tickets for two chances."

Why wasn't I surprised when that second ticket won the bike? "I can't believe you won!" laughed Diane, delighted.

"I didn't," I said. "It's pretty clear that Emily did."

And why wasn't I surprised when the bike dealer happily substituted a gorgeous new girl's mountain bike for the man's bike advertised?

Coincidence? Maybe. I like to think it was God's way of rewarding a little girl for a sacrifice beyond her years--while giving her dad a lesson in charity and the power of the Lord.

--Ed Koper

The last straw

Let us consider how we may spur one another on to love and good deeds (Hebrews 10:24, NIV).

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

"Gimme that. It's mine!"

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"But what if I pick someone I don't get along with?" frowned Kelly.



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

"Now, who will build a little crib for us?" she asked.

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

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

"Now we need some straw," said Mother, and together they headed out to the car to go searching for some in the nearby fields. The snow hadn't yet come, so they still had a good chance of finding something suitable. Surprisingly, no one fought over who was going to sit in the front seat that day as they drove around the countryside, looking for an empty field. At last they spotted a small, vacant patch of land that had been covered with tall grass in the summer. Now, in mid December, the grass had dried down to yellow stalks that looked just like real straw.

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

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

"When can we pick names?" shouted the children.



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

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

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

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

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

Mother noticed other changes during that week, too. The children weren't teasing or fighting as much. An argument would start and then suddenly stop for no apparent reason. Even Eric and Kelly seemed to be getting along better. In fact, all the children wore secret smiles and giggled to themselves at times.

By Sunday, everyone was anxious to pick new names again, and this time there was even more laughter and merriment during the picking process, except for Eric. Once again he unfolded his piece of paper, looked at it, and then stuffed it in his pocket without a word. Mother





noticed, but said nothing.

The second week of the game brought more amazing events. The garbage was taken out without anyone being asked. Someone emptied Kelly's wastebasket, normally filled to overflowing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I think she's perfect," said Mother. "Baby Jesus probably didn't have much hair when He was born either, and I bet He'd like to be





represented by a doll who's had so many hugs."

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

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

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

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

Everyone immediately jumped up from the table, but Mother stopped them. "No! Stay where you are," she said. "Let me talk to him alone first."

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

"I have to leave," he said quietly, through his tears. "If I don't, I'll



spoil Christmas for everyone!"

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

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

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

"But he'll freeze!" said Mother.

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

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

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

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

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

"Mom," the little boy said through his tears, "You just don't understand. I got Kelly's name *all four weeks!* And I don't like Kelly! I can't do one more nice thing for her or I'll die! I tried, Mom. I really did. I sneaked in her room every night and fixed her bed. I even laid out her crummy



nightgown. I emptied her wastebasket. Mom, I even let her use my race car one day, but she smashed it right into the wall like always!

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

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

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

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

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

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



difference.

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

The last straw was Eric's after all.

--*Paula McDonald*

An exchange of gifts

Those who bring sunshine to the lives of others cannot keep it from themselves.--Sir James Matthew Barrie

I grew up believing that Christmas was a time when strange and wonderful things happened, when wise and royal visitors came riding, when at midnight the barnyard animals talked to one another, and in the light of a fabulous star God came down to us as a little child. Christmas to me has always been a time of enchantment, and never more so than the year that my son Marty was eight.

That was the year that my children and I moved into a cozy trailer home in a forested area just outside of Redmond, Washington. As the holiday approached, our spirits were light, not to be dampened even by the winter rains that swept down Puget Sound to douse our home and make our floors muddy.

Throughout that December, Marty had been the most spirited, and busiest, of us all. He was my youngest; a cheerful boy, blond-haired and playful, with a quaint habit of looking up at you and cocking his head like a puppy when you talked to him. Actually, the reason for this was that Marty was deaf in his left ear, but it was a condition that he never complained about.

For weeks, I had been watching Marty. I knew that something was going on with him that he was not telling me about. I saw how eagerly he made his bed, took out the trash, and carefully set the table and helped Rick and Pam prepare dinner before I got home from work. I saw how he silently collected his tiny allowance and tucked it away, spending not a cent of it. I had no idea what all this quiet activity was about, but I suspected that somehow it had something to do with Kenny.

Kenny was Marty's friend, and ever since they had found each other in the springtime, they were seldom apart. If you called to one, you got them both. Their world was in the meadow, a horse pasture broken by a small winding stream, where the boys caught frogs and snakes, where they would search for arrowheads or hidden treasure, or where they would spend an afternoon feeding peanuts to the squirrels.



Times were hard for our little family, and we had to do some scrimping to get by. With my job as a meat wrapper and with a lot of ingenuity around the trailer, we managed to have elegance on a shoestring. But not Kenny's family. They were desperately poor, and his mother was having a real struggle to feed and clothe her two children. They were a good, solid family. But Kenny's mom was a proud woman, very proud, and she had strict rules.

How we worked, as we did each year, to make our home festive for the holiday! Ours was a handcrafted Christmas of gifts hidden away and ornaments strung about the place.

Marty and Kenny would sometimes sit still at the table long enough to help make cornucopias or weave little baskets for the tree. But then, in a flash, one would whisper to the other, and they would be out the door and sliding cautiously under the electric fence into the horse pasture that separated our home from Kenny's.

One night shortly before Christmas, when my hands were deep in dough, shaping tiny nutlike Danish cookies heavily spiced with cinnamon, Marty came to me and said in a tone mixed with pleasure and pride, "Mom, I've bought Kenny a Christmas present. Want to see it?" *So that's what he's been up to*, I said to myself. "It's something he's wanted for a long, long time, Mom."

After carefully wiping his hands on a dish towel, he pulled from his pocket a small box. Lifting the lid, I gazed at the pocket compass that my son had been saving all those allowances to buy. A little compass to point an eight-year-old adventurer through the woods.

"It's a lovely gift, Martin," I said, but even as I spoke, a disturbing thought came to mind. I knew how Kenny's mother felt about their poverty. They could barely afford to exchange gifts among themselves, and giving presents to others was out of the question. I was sure that Kenny's proud mother would not permit her son to receive something he could not return in kind.

Gently, carefully, I talked over the problem with Marty. He understood what I was saying.



"I know, Mom, I know! * But what if it was a secret? What if they never found out who gave it?"

I didn't know how to answer him. I just didn't know.

The day before Christmas was rainy and cold and gray. The three kids and I all but fell over one another as we elbowed our way about our little home, putting finishing touches on Christmas secrets and preparing for family and friends who would be dropping by.

Night settled in. The rain continued. I looked out the window over the sink and felt an odd sadness. How mundane the rain seemed for Christmas Eve! Would any royal men come riding on such a night? I doubted it. It seemed to me that strange and wonderful things happened only on clear nights, nights when one could at least see a star in the heavens.

I turned from the window, and as I checked on the ham and homemade bread warming in the oven, I saw Marty slip out the door. He wore his coat over his pajamas, and he clutched a tiny, colorfully wrapped box in his hand.

Down through the soggy pasture he went, then a quick slide under the electric fence and across the yard to Kenny's house. Up the steps on tiptoe, shoes squishing; open the screen door just a crack; place the gift on the doorstep, then a deep breath, a reach for the doorbell, and a press on it hard.

Quickly Marty turned, ran down the steps and across the yard in a wild race to get away unnoticed. Then, suddenly, he banged into the electric fence.

The shock sent him reeling. He lay stunned on the wet ground. His body quivered and he gasped for breath. Then slowly, weakly, confused and frightened, he began the grueling trip back home.

"Marty," we cried as he stumbled through the door, "what happened?" His lower lip quivered, his eyes brimmed.



"I forgot about the fence, and it knocked me down!"

I hugged his muddy little body to me. He was still dazed and there was a red mark beginning to blister on his face from his mouth to his ear. Quickly I treated the blister and, with a warm cup of cocoa soothing him, Marty's bright spirits returned. I tucked him into bed and just before he fell asleep, he looked up at me and said, "Mom, Kenny didn't see me. I'm sure he didn't see me."

That Christmas Eve I went to bed unhappy and puzzled. It seemed such a cruel thing to happen to a little boy while on the purest kind of Christmas mission, doing what the Lord wants us all to do--giving to others--and giving in secret at that. I did not sleep well that night. Somewhere deep inside I think I must have been feeling the disappointment that the night of Christmas had come and it had been just an ordinary, problem-filled night, no mysterious enchantment at all.

But I was wrong.

By morning the rain had stopped and the sun shone. The streak on Marty's face was very red, but I could tell that the burn was not serious. We opened our presents, and soon, not unexpectedly, Kenny was knocking on the door, eager to show Marty his new compass and tell about the mystery of its arrival. It was plain that Kenny didn't suspect Marty at all, and while the two of them talked, Marty just smiled and smiled.

Then I noticed that while the two boys were comparing their Christmases, nodding and gesturing and chattering away, Marty was not cocking his head. When Kenny was talking, Marty seemed to be listening with his deaf ear. Weeks later a report came from the school nurse, verifying what Marty and I already knew. "Marty now has complete hearing in both ears."

The mystery of how Marty regained his hearing, and still has it, remains just that--a mystery. Doctors suspect, of course, that the shock from the electric fence was somehow responsible. Perhaps so. Whatever the reason, I just remain thankful to God for the good exchange of gifts that was made that night.

So you see, strange and wonderful things still happen on the





night of our Lord's birth. And one does not have to have a clear night, either, to follow a fabulous star.

--*Diane Rayner*



Golden shoes for Jesus

Somehow, not only for Christmas

But all the long year through,

The joy that you give to others

Is the joy that comes back to you.

--John Greenleaf Whittier

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

Why did I come to town today? I wondered. My feet ached almost as much as my head. My list contained names of several people who claimed they wanted nothing, but I knew their feelings would be hurt if I didn't buy them something.

Buying for people who had everything, and deplored the high cost of items, I considered gift buying anything but fun.

Hurriedly, I filled my shopping cart with last-minute items and proceeded to the long checkout lines. I picked the shortest, but it looked as if it would mean at least a 20 minute wait.

In front of me were two small children--a boy of about five and a slightly younger girl. The boy wore a ragged coat. Enormously large, tattered tennis shoes jutted far out in front of his much-too-short jeans. He clutched several crumpled dollar bills in his grimy hands.

The girl's clothing resembled her brother's. Her head was a matted mass of curly hair. Remainders of an evening meal showed on her small face. She carried a beautiful pair of shiny, gold house slippers. As the



Christmas music sounded in the store's stereo system, the small girl hummed along, off-key, but happily.

When we finally approached the checkout register, the girl carefully placed the shoes on the counter. She treated them as though they were a treasure. The clerk rang up the bill. "That'll be \$6.09," she said.

The boy laid his crumpled bills atop the stand while he searched his pockets. He finally came up with \$3.12. "I guess we'll have to put them back," he bravely announced. "We'll come back some other time, maybe tomorrow."

With that statement, a soft sob broke from the little girl. "But Jesus would have loved these shoes," she cried.

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

Quickly I handed \$3.00 to the clerk. These children had waited in line for a long time. And, after all, it was Christmas. Suddenly a pair of arms came around me and a small voice said, "Thank you, lady."

"What did you mean when you said Jesus would like the shoes?" I asked.

The boy answered, "Our mommy is sick and going to Heaven. Daddy said she might go before Christmas to be with Jesus."

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

My eyes flooded as I looked into her tear-streaked face. "Yes," I answered, "I'm sure she will." Silently, I thanked God for using these children to remind me of the true spirit of giving.

--*Helga Schmidt* --*Submitted by Kelly Kaman*



The Christmas scout

If there is among you a poor man of your brethren, within any of the gates in your land which the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart nor shut your hand from your poor brother, but you shall open your hand wide to him and willingly lend him sufficient for his need, whatever he needs (Deuteronomy 15:7-8, NKJ).

In spite of the fun and laughter, 13-year-old Frank Wilson was not happy.

It was true that he had received all the presents he wanted. And he enjoyed these traditional Christmas Eve reunions of relatives--this year at Aunt Susan's--for the purpose of exchanging gifts and good wishes.

But Frank was not happy because this was his first Christmas without his brother, Steve, who, during the year, had been killed by a reckless driver. Frank missed his brother and the close companionship they had together.

Frank said good-bye to his relatives and explained to his parents that he was leaving a little early to see a friend; from there he could walk home. Since it was cold outside, Frank put on his new plaid jacket. It was his favorite gift. The other presents he placed on his new sled.

Then Frank headed out, hoping to find the patrol leader of his Boy Scout troop. Frank always felt understood by him. Though rich in wisdom, his patrol leader lived in the Flats, the section of town where most of the poor lived, and he did odd jobs to help support his family. To Frank's disappointment, his friend was not at home.

As Frank hiked down the street toward home, he caught glimpses of trees and decorations in many of the small houses. Then, through one front window, he glimpsed a shabby room with the limp stockings hanging over an empty fireplace. A woman was seated near them weeping.

The stockings reminded him of the way he and his brother had always hung theirs side by side. The next morning, they would be bursting



with presents. A sudden thought struck Frank--he had not done his "good turn" for the day. Before the impulse passed, he knocked on the door.

"Yes?" the sad voice of the woman inquired.

"May I come in?"

"You are very welcome," she said, seeing his sled full of gifts, and assuming he was making a collection, "but I have no food or gifts for you. I have nothing for my own children."

"That's not why I am here," Frank replied. "Please choose whatever presents you'd like for your children from this sled."

"Why, God bless you!" the amazed woman answered gratefully.

She selected some candies, a game, the toy airplane and a puzzle. When she took the new Scout flashlight, Frank almost cried out. Finally, the stockings were full.

"Won't you tell me your name?" she asked, as Frank was leaving.

"Just call me the Christmas Scout," he replied.

The visit left the boy touched, and with an unexpected flicker of joy in his heart. He understood that his sorrow was not the only sorrow in the world. Before he left the Flats, he had given away the remainder of his gifts. The plaid jacket had gone to a shivering boy.

But he trudged homeward cold and uneasy. Having given his presents away, Frank now could think of no reasonable explanation to offer his parents. He wondered how he could make them understand.

"Where are your presents, son?" asked his father as he entered the house.

"I gave them away."

"The airplane from Aunt Susan? Your coat from Grandma?



Your flashlight? We thought you were happy with your gifts."

"I was--very happy," the boy answered lamely.

"But, Frank, how could you be so impulsive?" his mother asked. "How will we explain to the relatives who spent so much time and gave so much love shopping for you?"

His father was firm. "You made your choice, Frank. We cannot afford any more presents."

His brother gone, his family disappointed in him, Frank suddenly felt dreadfully alone. He had not expected a reward for his generosity, for he knew that a good deed always should be its own reward. It would be tarnished otherwise. So he did not want his gifts back. However, he wondered if he would ever again truly recapture joy in his life. He thought he had this evening, but it had been fleeting. Frank thought of his brother and sobbed himself to sleep.

The next morning, he came downstairs to find his parents listening to Christmas music on the radio. Then the announcer spoke:

"Merry Christmas, everybody! The nicest Christmas story we have this morning comes from the Flats. A crippled boy down there has a new sled this morning, another youngster has a fine plaid jacket, and several families report that their children were made happy last night by gifts from a teenage boy who simply referred to himself as the Christmas Scout. No one could identify him, but the children of the Flats claim that the Christmas Scout was a personal representative of old Santa Claus himself."

Frank felt his father's arms go around his shoulders, and he saw his mother smiling through her tears. "Why didn't you tell us? We didn't understand. We just thought you lost the presents or something. We are so proud of you, son."

The carols came over the air again filling the room with music. "...Praises sing to God the King, and peace to men on Earth."

--*Samuel D. Bogan*

The "real" Santa Claus

You will find, as you look back upon your life, that the moments that stand out are the moments when you have done things for others.--Henry Drummond

6:00 A.M., December 23, 1961. I am writing this en route from New York to Los Angeles by plane. When I get home to Honolulu tomorrow, I must have a Christmas story ready to tell to the neighborhood children. They have asked me to title it, "Is There a Santa Claus?" How can I be honest and say no, and disappoint a lot of kids who think he is real?

I hope we get to Los Angeles on time. Almost everyone aboard has a connection to make.

8:10 P.M. The pilot has just given us bad news. Los Angeles is fogged in; no aircraft can land. We have to detour to Ontario, California, an emergency field not far from Los Angeles.

3:12 A.M., December 24. With one problem and another, we have just landed in Ontario six hours behind schedule. Everyone is cold, exhausted, hungry and irritable. All of us have missed our connections. Many will not make it home by Christmas Eve. I am in no mood to make up a story about Santa Claus.

7:15 A.M. I am writing this at the Los Angeles airport. A lot has happened in the last four hours. The airfield at Ontario was bedlam. Scores of Los Angeles-bound planes had to land there. The frantic passengers--over 1,000 of them--had hoped to get word to their families that they would be late. But the telegraph office was closed, and there were endless lines at the telephone booths. No food. No coffee.

The employees at the small terminal were just as frenzied and fatigued as the passengers. Everything went wrong. Baggage was heaped helter-skelter, regardless of destination. No one seemed to know which buses would go where, or at what time. Babies were crying; women were screaming questions; men were grumbling and being sarcastic. The mob pushed and jostled, like a swarm of frightened ants, in the effort to find luggage. It hardly seemed possible that this was the day before Christmas.



Suddenly, amid the nervous commotion, I heard a confident, unhurried voice. It stood out like a great church bell--clear, calm and filled with love.

"Now don't you worry, ma'am," the voice said. "We're going to find your luggage and get you to La Jolla in time. Everything's going to be just fine." This was the first kind, constructive statement I had heard in a long while.

I turned and saw a man who might have stepped right out of "The Night Before Christmas." He was short and stout, with a florid, merry face. On his head was some sort of official cap, the kind that sightseeing guides wear. Tumbling out beneath were cascades of curly white hair. He wore hunting boots, as if, perhaps, he had just arrived after a snowy trip behind a team of reindeer. Pulled snugly over his barrel chest and fat tummy was a red sweatshirt.

The man stood next to a homemade pushcart, composed of an enormous packing box resting on four bicycle wheels. It contained urns of steaming coffee and piles of miscellaneous cardboard cartons.

"Here you are, ma'am," said the unusual man with the cheerful voice. "Have some hot coffee while we look for your luggage."

Pushing the cart before him, pausing only long enough to hand coffee to others, or to say a cheerful "Merry Christmas to you, brother!" or to promise that he would be back to help, he searched among the sprawling piles of luggage. Finally, he found the woman's possessions. Placing them on the pushcart, he said to her, "You just follow me. We'll put you on the bus to La Jolla."

After getting her settled, Kris Kringle (that's what I had started calling him) returned to the terminal. I found myself tagging along and helping him with the coffee. I knew that my bus wouldn't leave for about an hour.

Kris Kringle cut a swath of light through the dismal field. There was something about him that made everyone smile. Dispensing coffee, blowing a child's nose, laughing, singing snatches of Christmas songs, he



calmed panicky passengers and sped them on their way.

When a woman fainted, it was Kris Kringle who pushed through the helpless group around her. From one of his cartons, he produced smelling salts and a blanket. When the woman was conscious again, he asked three men to carry her to a comfortable settee and told them to use the loudspeaker system to find a doctor.

Who is this funny little man who gets things done, I wondered. I asked him, "What company do you work for?"

"Sonny," he said to me, "see that kid over there in the blue coat? She's lost. Give her this candy bar, and tell her to stay right where she is. If she wanders around, her mother won't ever find her."

I did as ordered, then repeated, "What company do you work for?"

"Shucks, I'm not working for anyone. I'm just having fun. Every December I spend my two-week vacation helping travelers. What with this rush season, there are always thousands who need a hand. Hey, look what we have over here."

He had spotted a tearful young mother with a baby. Winking at me, Kris Kringle perked his cap at a jaunty angle and rolled his cart over to them. The woman was sitting on her suitcase, clutching her baby.

"Well, well, sister," he said, "that's a mighty pretty baby you have. What's the trouble?"

Between sobs, the young woman told him that she hadn't seen her husband for over a year. She was to meet him at a hotel in San Diego. He wouldn't know what had delayed her and would worry, and the baby was hungry.

From the pushcart, Kris Kringle took a bottle of warmed milk. "Now don't you worry. Everything will be all right," he said.

As he guided her to the bus for Los Angeles--the one I was to leave on--he wrote down her name and the name of the hotel in San Diego.





He promised her that he would get a message to her husband.

"God bless you," she said, climbing aboard and cradling the now sleeping child in her arms. "I hope you have a merry Christmas and receive many wonderful presents."

"Thank you, sister," he said, tipping his cap. "I've already received the greatest gift of all, and you gave it to me. Ho, ho," he went on, seeing something of interest in the crowd, "there's an old fellow in trouble. Good-bye, sister. I'm going over there to give myself another present."

He got off the bus. I got off, too, since the bus wouldn't leave for a few minutes. He turned to me. "Say," he said, "aren't you taking this jalopy to Los Angeles?"

"Yes."

"Okay, you've been a good assistant. Now I want to give you a Christmas present. You sit next to that lady and look after her and the baby. When you get to Los Angeles"--he fished out a piece of paper--"telephone her husband at this hotel in San Diego. Tell him about his family's delay."

He knew what my answer would be because he left without even waiting for a reply. I sat down next to the young mother and took the baby from her. Looking out the window, I saw Kris Kringle in his bulging red sweatshirt disappearing into the crowd.

The bus started. I felt good. I began thinking of home and Christmas. And I knew then how I would answer the question of the children in my neighborhood: "Is there a Santa Claus?" I had met him.

--*William J. Lederer*