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Christmas in the Heart

No. 2





Always on the lookout for a good story, Family members around the world have sent us some of their favorites, as well as some new discoveries. We hope you enjoy them. God bless you with a wonderful Christmas, as you share the Lord's love with others, and enjoy His blessings together.

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The Christmas Envelope

It's just a small, white envelope stuck among the branches of our Christmas tree. No name, no identification, no inscription. It has peeked through the branches of our tree for the past 10 years or so. It all began because my husband Mike hated Christmas. Oh, not the true meaning of Christmas, but the commercial aspects of it—overspending, the frantic running around at the last minute to get a tie for Uncle Harry and the dusting powder for Grandma, the gifts given in desperation because you couldn't think of anything else.

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

Our son Kevin, who was 12 that year, was on the wrestling team at the junior level at the school he attended. Shortly before Christmas, there was a non-league match against a team sponsored by an inner-city church, mostly black. These youngsters, dressed in sneakers so ragged that shoestrings seemed

to be the only thing holding them together, presented a sharp contrast to our boys in their spiffy blue and gold uniforms and sparkling new wrestling shoes. As the match began, I was alarmed to see that the other team was wrestling without headgear, a kind of light helmet designed to protect a wrestler's ears. It was a luxury the ragtag team obviously could not afford.

Well, we ended up walloping them. We took every weight class. And as each of their boys got up from the mat, he swaggered around in his tatters with false bravado, a kind of street pride that couldn't acknowledge defeat. Mike, seated beside me, shook his head sadly, "I wish just one of them could have won," he said. "They have a lot of potential, but losing like this could take the heart right out of them."

Mike loved kids—all kids—and he knew them, having coached little league football, baseball and lacrosse. That's when the idea for his present came. That afternoon, I went to a local sporting goods store and bought an assortment of wrestling headgear and

shoes and sent them anonymously to the inner-city church. On Christmas Eve, I placed the envelope on the tree, the note inside telling Mike what I had done and that this was his gift from me. His smile was the brightest thing about Christmas that year and in succeeding years.

For each Christmas, I followed the tradition—one year sending a group of mentally handicapped youngsters to a hockey game, another year a check to a pair of elderly brothers whose home had burned to the ground the week before Christmas, and on and on. The envelope became the highlight of our Christmas. It was always the last thing opened on Christmas morning and our children, ignoring their new toys, would stand with wide-eyed anticipation as their dad lifted the envelope from the tree to reveal its contents.

As the children grew, the toys gave way to more practical presents, but the envelope never lost its allure. And the story doesn't end there. You see, we lost Mike last year due to dreaded cancer. When Christmas rolled around, I was still so wrapped in grief that I barely got the tree up. But Christmas Eve found me placing an envelope on the tree, and in the morning, it was joined by three more. Each of our children, unbeknownst to the others, had placed an envelope on the tree for their dad. The tradition has grown and someday will expand even further with our grandchildren standing around the tree with wide-eyed anticipation watching as their fathers take down the envelope. Mike's spirit of giving, like that of the One who gave Himself at Christmas, will always be with us.

—Author Unknown

A Special Arrangement

Thanksgiving, the holiday celebrated in the U.S. towards the end of November, is traditionally the beginning of the Christmas season there. We offer you this story of one whose heart was heavy as the time for giving thanks began.

Sandra felt as low as the heels of her Birkenstocks as she pushed against a November gust and the florist shop door. Her life had been easy, like a spring breeze. Then in the fourth month of her second pregnancy, a minor automobile accident stole her ease. During this Thanksgiving week she would have delivered a son. She grieved over her loss. As if that weren't enough, her husband's company threatened a transfer. Then her sister, whose holiday visit she coveted, called saying she could not come. What's worse, Sandra's friend infuriated her by suggesting her grief was a God-given path to maturity that would allow her to empathize with oth-

ers who suffer.

Has she lost a child?—No. She has no idea what I'm feeling. Sandra shuddered. *Thanksgiving? Thankful for what?* she wondered. For a careless driver whose truck was hardly scratched when he rear-ended her? For an airbag that saved her life but took that of her child?

"Good afternoon. Can I help you?" The flower shop clerk's approach startled her. "Sorry," said the clerk, whose name was Jenny. "I just didn't want you to think I was ignoring you."

"I ... I need an arrangement."

"For Thanksgiving?" Sandra nodded. "Do you want beautiful but ordinary, or would you like to challenge the day with a customer favorite I call the 'Thanksgiving Special'?" Jenny saw Sandra's curiosity and continued. "I'm convinced that flowers tell stories, that each arrangement suggests a particular feeling.

Are you looking for something that conveys gratitude this Thanksgiving?"

"Not exactly!" Sandra blurted. "Sorry, but in the last five months, everything that could go wrong has."

Sandra regretted her outburst but was surprised when Jenny said, "I have the perfect arrangement for you." The door's small bell suddenly rang.

"Barbara! Hi," Jenny said. "I have your order ready. Just a moment." She politely excused herself from Sandra and walked toward a small workroom. She quickly reappeared carrying a massive arrangement of greenery, bows, and long-stemmed thorny roses. Only, the ends of the rose stems were neatly snipped, no flowers. "Want this in a box?" Jenny asked. Sandra watched for Barbara's response. Was this a joke? Who would want rose stems and no flowers! She waited for laughter, for someone to notice the absence of flowers atop the thorny stems, but neither woman did.

"Yes, please. It's exquisite," said Barbara. "You'd think after three years of getting the Special, I'd not be so moved by its significance, but it's happening again. My family will love this one. Thanks."

Sandra stared. *Why so normal a conversation about so strange an arrangement?* She wondered. "Uh, said Sandra, pointing. "That lady just left with, uh..."

"Yes?"

"Well, she had no flowers!"

"Right, I cut off the flowers."

"Off?"

"Off. Yep. That's the Special. I call it the 'Thanksgiving Thorns Bouquet.'"

"But, why do people pay for that?" In spite of herself, Sandra chuckled.

"Do you really want to know?"

"I couldn't leave this shop without knowing. I'd think about nothing else!"

"That might be good," said Jenny. "Well," she continued, "Barbara came into the shop

three years ago feeling very much like you feel today. She thought she had very little to be thankful for. She had lost her father to cancer, the family business was failing, her son was into drugs, and she faced major surgery."

"Ouch!" said Sandra.

"That same year," Jenny explained, "I lost my husband. I assumed complete responsibility for the shop and for the first time, spent the holidays alone. I had no children, no husband, no family nearby, and too great a debt to allow any travel."

"What did you do?"

"I learned to be thankful for thorns."

Sandra's eyebrows lifted. "Thorns?"

"I'm a Christian. I've always thanked God for good things in life and I never thought to ask Him why good things happened to me. But when bad stuff hit, did I ever ask! It took time to learn that dark times are important. I always enjoyed the 'flowers' of life but it took 'thorns' to show me the beauty of God's comfort. You know, the Bible says that God comforts us when we're afflicted and from His consolation we learn to comfort others."

Sandra gasped. "A friend read that passage to me and I was furious! I guess the truth is I don't want comfort. I've lost a baby and I'm angry with God." She started to ask Jenny to go on when the door's bell diverted their attention.

"Hey, Phil!" shouted Jenny as a balding, rotund man entered the shop. She softly touched Sandra's arm and moved to welcome him. He tucked her under his side for a warm hug. "I'm here for twelve thorny long-stemmed stems!" Phil laughed, heartily.

"I figured as much," said Jenny. "I've got them ready." She lifted a tissue-wrapped arrangement from the refrigerated cabinet.

"Beautiful," said Phil. "My wife will love them."

Sandra could not resist asking. "These are for your wife?" Phil saw that Sandra's curiosity matched his when he first heard of a Thorn

Bouquet. "Do you mind me asking, why thorns?"

"In fact, I'm glad you asked," he said. "Four years ago my wife and I nearly divorced. After forty years, we were in a real mess, but we slogged through, problem by rotten problem. We rescued our marriage—our love, really. Last year at Thanksgiving I stopped in here for flowers. I must have mentioned surviving a tough process because Jenny told me that for a long time she kept a vase of rose stems—stems!—as a reminder of what she learned from 'thorny' times. That was good enough for me. I took home stems. My wife and I decided to label each one for a specific thorny situation and give thanks for what the problem taught us. I'm pretty sure this stem review is becoming a tradition."

Phil paid Jenny, thanked her again and as he left, said to Sandra, "I highly recommend the Special!"

"I don't know if I can be thankful for the thorns in my life," Sandra said to Jenny.

"Well, my experience says that the thorns make the roses more precious. We treasure God's providential care more during trouble than at any other time. Remember, Jesus wore a crown of thorns so that we might know His love. Do not resent thorns."

Tears rolled down Sandra's cheeks. For

the first time since the accident she loosened her grip on resentment. "I'll take twelve long-stemmed thorns, please."

"I hoped you would," Jenny said. "I'll have them ready in a minute. Then, every time you see them, remember to appreciate both good and hard times. We grow through both."

"Thank you. What do I owe you?"

"Nothing. Nothing but a pledge to work toward healing your heart. The first year's arrangement is always on me." Jenny handed a card to Sandra. "I'll attach a card like this to your arrangement but maybe you'd like to read it first. It's written by a blind man. Go ahead, read it."

My God, I have never thanked Thee for my thorn! I have thanked Thee a thousand times for my roses, but never once for my thorn. Teach me the glory of the cross I bear. Teach me the value of my thorns. Show me that I have climbed to Thee by the path of pain. Show me that my tears have made my rainbow.—George Matheson

Jenny said, "Happy Thanksgiving, Sandra," handing her the Special. "I look forward to our knowing each other better."

Sandra smiled. She turned, opened the door and walked toward hope.

—Author unknown

A Perfect Mistake

Mother's father worked as a carpenter. On this particular day, he was building some crates for the clothes his church was sending to some orphanage in China for Christmas. On his way home, he reached into his shirt pocket to find his glasses, but they were gone. When he mentally replayed his earlier actions, he realized what must have happened: The glasses had slipped out of his

pocket unnoticed and fallen into one of the crates, which he had nailed shut. His brand-new glasses were heading for China!

The Great Depression of the 1930s was at its height in the U.S. and Grandpa had six children. He had spent \$20 for those glasses that very morning. He was upset by the thought of having to buy another pair. "It's not fair," he told God as he drove home in

frustration. "I've been very faithful in giving of my time and money to Your work, and now this."

Several months later, the director of the orphanage was on furlough in the United States. He wanted to visit all the churches that supported him in China, so he came to speak one Sunday at my grandfather's small church in Chicago. The missionary began by thanking the people for their faithfulness in supporting the orphanage.

"But most of all," he said, "I must thank you for the glasses you sent last year. You see, the Communists had just swept through the orphanage, destroying everything, including my glasses. I was desperate. Even if I had the money, there was simply no way of replacing those glasses. Along with not being able to see well, I experienced headaches every day, so my coworkers and I were much in prayer about this. Then your Christmas crates arrived. When my staff removed the covers, they found a pair of glasses lying on top."

The missionary paused long enough to let his words sink in. Then, still gripped with the wonder of it all, he continued: "Folks, when I tried on the glasses, it was as though they had been custom-made just for me! I want to thank you for being a part of that."

The people listened, happy for the miraculous glasses. However, they thought the missionary surely must have confused their church with another. There were no glasses on their list of items to be sent overseas.

But sitting quietly in the back, with tears streaming down his face, an ordinary carpenter realized the Master Carpenter had used him in an extraordinary way.

—Author Unknown

Ready for Christmas

"Ready for Christmas," she said with a sigh,
As she gave a last touch to the gifts piled high.
Then wearily she sat for a moment and read,
Till soon, very soon, she was nodding her head.
Then quietly spoke a voice in her dream!

"Ready for Christmas! What do you mean?
I seem to remember that only last week,
You wouldn't acknowledge your friend on the
street.

"Ready for Christmas, while holding a grudge?
Perhaps you'd better let God be the judge.
Why, how can the Christ child come and abide
In a heart that is selfish and still filled with
pride?

Ready for Christmas, when only today
A beggar lad came and you turned him away
Without even a smile to show that you cared?
So little he asked, which you could have
spared.

"Ready for Christmas! You've worked, it is true,
But just doing the things that you wanted to
do.

Ready for Christmas! Your circle's too small.
Why, you are not ready for Christmas at all!"
She awoke with a start, and a cry of despair,
"There's so little time, and I've still to prepare!
Oh, Father, forgive me. I see what you mean:
To be ready means more than a house swept
clean.

"Yes, more than the giving of gifts and a tree.
It's the heart swept clean that He wants to see,
A heart that is free from bitterness, sin—
Ready for Christmas means ready for Him!"

—Author unknown



Bobby's Gift

By Thomas Pucci

Six-year-old Bobby was getting cold sitting out in his backyard in the snow. Bobby didn't wear boots; he didn't like them and anyway he didn't own any. The thin sneakers he wore had a few holes in them and they did a poor job of keeping out the cold.

Bobby had been in his backyard for about an hour already. And, try as he might, he could not come up with an idea for his mother's Christmas gift. He shook his head as he thought, *This is useless. Even if I do come up with an idea, I don't have any money to spend.*

Ever since his father passed away three years before, the family of five had struggled. It wasn't because his mother didn't care, or try. There just never seemed to be enough. She worked nights at the hospital, but the small wage that she was earning could only be stretched so far.

What the family lacked in money and material things, though, they more than made up for in love and family unity. Bobby had two older sisters and one younger, who all ran the household in their mother's absence.

All three of his sisters had already made beautiful gifts for their mother. Somehow it just wasn't fair. Here it was Christmas Eve already, and he had nothing.

Wiping a tear from his eye, Bobby kicked the snow and started to walk down to the street where the shops and stores were. It wasn't easy being six without a father, especially when he needed a man to talk to.

Bobby walked from shop to shop, looking into each decorated window. Everything seemed so beautiful and so out of reach. It was starting to get dark and Bobby reluctantly turned to walk home when suddenly his eyes caught the glimmer of the setting

sun's rays reflecting off of something along the curb. He reached down and discovered a shiny dime.

Never before has anyone felt so wealthy as Bobby felt at that moment. As he held his newfound treasure, a warmth spread throughout his entire body and he walked into the first store he saw. His excitement quickly turned cold when salesperson after salesperson told him that he could not buy anything with only a dime.

He saw a flower shop and went inside to wait in line. When the shop owner asked if he could help him, Bobby presented the dime and asked if he could buy one flower for his mother's Christmas gift. The shop owner looked at Bobby and his ten-cent offering. Then he put his hand on Bobby's shoulder and said to him, "You just wait here and I'll see what I can do for you."

As Bobby waited, he looked at the beautiful flowers and even though he was a boy, he could see why mothers and girls liked flowers.

The sound of the door closing as the last customer left jolted Bobby back to reality. All alone in the shop, Bobby began to feel alone and afraid.

Suddenly the shop owner returned and moved to the counter. There, before Bobby's eyes, lay twelve long-stemmed red roses, with leaves of green and tiny white flowers all tied together with a big silver bow. Bobby's heart sang as the shop owner picked them up and placed them gently into a long white box.

"That will be ten cents, young man," the shop owner said reaching out his hand for the dime. Slowly, Bobby moved his hand to give the man his dime. Could this be true? No one else would give him a thing for his

dime! Sensing the boy's reluctance, the shop owner added, "I just happened to have some roses on sale for ten cents a dozen. Would you like them?"

This time Bobby did not hesitate, and when the man placed the long box into his hands, he knew it was true. Walking out the door that the owner was holding for Bobby, he heard the man say, "Merry Christmas, son."

As he returned inside, the shop owner's wife walked into the room. "Who were you talking to, and where are the roses you were fixing?"

Staring out the window, and blinking the tears from his own eyes, he replied, "A strange thing happened to me this morning. While I was setting up things to open the shop, I thought I heard a voice telling me to set aside a dozen of my best roses for a

special gift. I wasn't sure at the time whether I had lost my mind or what, but I set them aside anyway. Then just a few minutes ago, a little boy came into the shop and wanted to buy a flower for his mother with one small dime."

"When I looked at him, I saw myself, many years ago. I, too, was a poor boy with nothing to buy my mother a Christmas gift. A bearded man, whom I never knew, stopped me on the street and told me that he wanted to give me ten dollars."

"When I saw that little boy tonight, I knew who that voice was, and I put together a dozen of my very best roses."

The shop owner and his wife hugged each other tightly, and as they stepped out into the bitter cold air, they somehow didn't feel cold at all.

There Are No Coincidences

By Warren Miller

For three days a fierce winter storm had traveled 1,500 miles across the North Pacific from Alaska, packing gale-force winds and torrential rains. In the North American Sierra Nevadas, the snow was piling up and would offer great skiing once the storm had passed.

In the foothills of the Sierras in the town of Grass Valley, California, the streets were flooded and in some parts of the town, the power was off where fallen trees had snapped overhead cables. At the small church, the heavy rain and high winds beat against the windows with a violence that Father O'Malley had never before heard.

In his tiny bedroom, out of the darkness the phone rang. As he picked up the phone, a voice quickly asked, "Is this Father O'Malley?"

"Yes."

"I'm calling from the hospital in Auburn," said a concerned female voice. "We have a terminally ill patient who is asking us to get someone to give him his last rites. Can you come quickly?"

"I'll try my best to make it," O'Malley answered. "But the river is over its banks, and trees are blown down all over town. Look for me within two hours."

The trip was only 30 miles, but it would be hard going. His progress was slow and cautious, but he continued on toward the hospital. Not a single vehicle passed him during his long, tense journey. Finally, in the near distance, he could see the lights of the small hospital, and he hoped he had arrived on time.

With his tattered Bible tucked deep inside his overcoat pocket, O'Malley forced the

car door open, stepped out and then leaned into the wind. Its power almost bowled him over, and he was nearly blown away from the hospital entrance. Once inside, the wind slammed the hospital door shut behind him. He heard footsteps headed his way. It was the night nurse.

"I'm so glad you could get here," she said. "The man I called you about is slipping fast, but he is still coherent. He's an alcoholic and his liver has finally given out. He's been here for a couple of weeks this time and hasn't had a single visitor. He lives up in the woods, and no one around here knows much about him. He always pays his bill with cash and doesn't seem to want to talk much."

"What's your patient's name?" O'Malley asked.

"The hospital staff has just been calling him Tom," she replied.

In the soft night-light of the room, Tom's thin, sallow countenance looked ghostlike behind a scraggly beard.

"Hello, Tom. I'm Father O'Malley," and he began to say the prayers of the last rites.

After the "amen," Tom perked up a bit, and he seemed to want to talk.

"Would you like to make your confession?" O'Malley asked him.

"Absolutely not," Tom answered. "But I would like to just talk with you a bit, before I go."

And so Tom and Father O'Malley talked about the Korean War, and the ferocity of the winter storm, and the knee-high grass and summer blossoms that would soon follow.

After a couple of hours, and after about the fourth or fifth time that Father O'Malley asked the same question, Tom replied, "Father, when I was young, I did something that was so bad that I haven't spent a single day since without thinking about it and re-living the horror."

Father O'Malley gently said, "I'm sure that God will forgive you, Tom, whatever it was

you did. He is love. He wants us to confess and to receive His forgiveness. He wants you to be free of whatever it is that has plagued you for so long."

"Even now, I still can't talk about what I did," Tom said. "Even to you."

O'Malley silently waited. Finally Tom said sadly, "Okay. It's too late for anyone to do anything to me now, so I guess I might as well tell you.

"I worked as a switchman on the railroad all my life, until I retired a few years ago and moved up here to the woods. Thirty-two years ago, I was working in Bakersfield on a night kind of like tonight. It was Christmastime."

Tom's face became intense as the words began to tumble out. "It happened during a bad winter storm with a lot of rain, 50-mile-an-hour winds and almost no visibility. Two nights before Christmas, the whole yard crew drank all through the swing shift. I volunteered to go out in the rain and wind and push the switch for the northbound 8:30 freight."

Tom's voice dropped almost to a whisper as he went on. "I guess I was more drunk than I thought I was because I pushed that switch in the wrong direction. At 45 miles an hour that freight train slammed into a passenger car at the next crossing and killed a young man, his wife and their two daughters."

"I have had to live with my being the cause of their deaths every day since then."

There was a long moment of silence as Tom's confession of this tragedy hung in the air. After what seemed like an eternity, Father O'Malley gently put his hand on Tom's shoulder and said very quietly, "I know God can forgive you, son, because I can. In that car were my mother, my father and my two older sisters."



Old Gentleman Gray

Said Old Gentleman Gray, "On Christmas Day,
If you want to be happy, give something away."

So he sent a fat turkey to Shoemaker Price,
And the shoemaker said, "What a big bird! How nice!
And since such a good dinner is now before me,
I'll send the roast I bought to poor Widow Lee."

"This is a fine roast!" said the pleased Widow Lee.
"And the kindness that sent it—how precious to me.
I would like to make someone as happy as I.
I'll send Washwoman Biddy my big pumpkin pie."

"Oh my," Biddy said. "'Tis the queen of all pies!
Just to look at its yellow face gladdens my eyes.
Now it's my turn, I think, and a nice chocolate cake
For the motherless Finnegan children I'll bake."

Said the Finnegan children, Rose, Denny and Hugh,
"Thank you so much, ma'am. How kind of you!
It smells sweet of spice, and we'll carry a slice
To poor lame Jake who has nothing that's nice."

"I thank you and thank you," said little lame Jake,
"For sharing with me your magnificent cake!
And in my basket, I'll save all of the crumbs
And give them to each little sparrow that comes."

And the sparrows they twittered as if they would say,
"We heard the tale from Old Gentleman Gray!
He started it all, saying, 'On Christmas Day,
If you want to be happy, give something away.'"

—Author Unknown

Christmas Day in the Morning

By Pearl S. Buck

He woke suddenly, and completely. It was four o'clock, the hour at which his father had always called him to get up and help with the milking. Strange how the habits of his youth clung to him still!

Fifty years had passed, and his father had been dead for thirty years of them, yet he awoke at four o'clock in the morning. He had trained himself to turn over and go back to sleep, but this morning it was Christmas. He did not try to sleep. Why did he feel so awake this morning?

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

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

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

When Rob heard these words, something in him woke; his father loved him! He had never thought of it before. 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 more loitering in the mornings and having to be called again. He got up after that, stumbling blind with sleep, and pulled on his clothes, his eyes tight shut, but he got up.

And then on the night before Christmas,

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

He wished that Christmas that he had a better present for his father. As usual he had gone to the ten-cent store and bought a tie. It had seemed nice enough until he lay thinking the night before Christmas.

He looked out of his attic window; the stars were bright. "Dad," he had once asked when he was a little boy, "what is a stable?"

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

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

The thought struck him like a silver dagger. Why should he not give his father a special gift too, out there in the barn? He could get up early, earlier than four, and he could creep into the barn and get all the milking done. He'd do it alone, milk and clean up, and then when his father went to start the milking, he'd see it all done, and he would know who had done it.

He laughed to himself as he gazed at the stars. It was what he would do, and he mustn't sleep too sound. He must have waked twenty times, striking a match each time to look at his old watch—midnight, and half past one, and then two o'clock. At a quarter to three he got up and put on his clothes. He crept downstairs, careful of the creaky boards, and let himself out.

The cows looked at him, sleepy and sur-

prised. It was too early for them too. He had never milked all alone before, but it seemed almost easy. He kept thinking about his father's surprise. His father would come in and get him, saying he would get things started while Rob was getting dressed. He'd go to the barn, open the door, and then he'd go to get the two empty milk cans. But they wouldn't be waiting or empty; they'd be standing in the milkhouse, filled. "What the...?" he could hear his father exclaiming.

He smiled and milked steadily, two strong streams rushing into the pail, frothing and fragrant. The task went more easily than he had ever known it to go before. Milking for once was not a chore. It was something else—a gift to his father, who loved him.

He finished, the two milk cans were full, and he covered them and closed the milkhouse door carefully. Back in his room he had only a minute to pull off his clothes in the darkness and jump into bed, for he heard his father up. He put the covers over his head to silence his quick breathing. The door opened. "Rob!" his father called. "We have to get up, son, even if it is Christmas."

"Awright," he said sleepily. The door closed and he lay still, laughing to himself. In just a few minutes his father would know. His dancing heart was ready to jump from his body. The minutes were endless—ten, fifteen, he did not know how many—and he heard his father's footsteps again. The door

opened and he lay still.

"Rob!"

"Yes, Dad."

His father was laughing, a queer, sobbing sort of laugh. "Thought you'd fool me, did you?" His father was standing beside his bed, feeling for him, pulling away the cover.

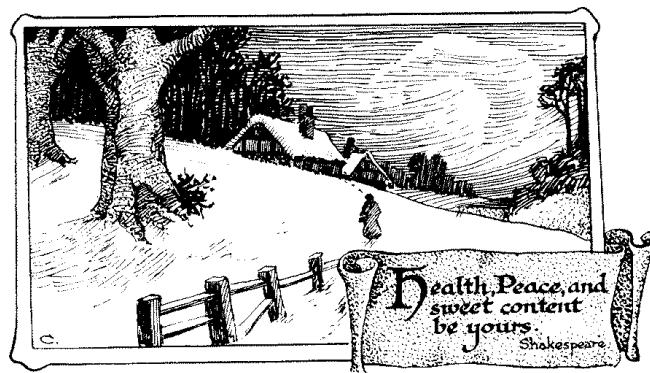
"It's for Christmas, Dad!" He found his father and clutched him in a great hug. He felt his father's arms go around him. It was dark and they could not see each other's faces.

"Rob, 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 as his father told his mother and made the three younger children listen about how he, Rob, had got up all by himself. "The best Christmas gift I ever had, and I'll remember it, son, every year on Christmas morning, so long as I live."

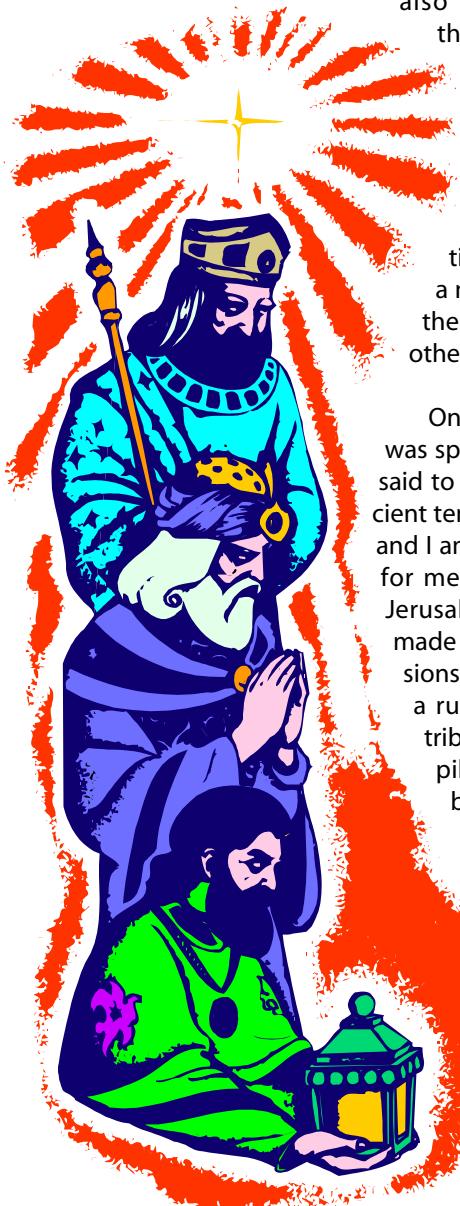
They had both remembered it; and now that his father was dead, he remembered it alone: that blessed Christmas dawn when, alone with the cows in the barn, he had made his first gift of true love.



The Other Wise Man

Adapted from a story by Henry Van Dyke

Each year at Christmastime we delight to follow the wise men as they came out of the East and made their way to Bethlehem, where they worshipped the newborn King and laid their treasures at His feet. But Henry Van Dyke has told us about another wise man who also followed the star not only to Bethlehem but throughout his life, and yet he never found the King.



This other wise man's name was Artaban. He was like an unknown soldier who didn't quite make the headlines. He was also one of the Magi and lived in Persia, a man of great wealth, great learning and great faith. With his learned companions he had searched the Scriptures as to the time that the Savior should be born. They knew that a new star would appear and it was agreed between them that Artaban would watch from Persia and the others would observe the sky from Babylon.

On the night that the sign was to be given, Artaban was speaking to nine of his Magi friends in his home. He said to them, "My three brethren are watching at the ancient temple of the Seven Spheres, at Borsippa, in Babylon and I am watching here. If the star appears, they will wait for me ten days, then we will all set out together for Jerusalem. I believe the sign will come tonight. I have made ready for the journey by selling all of my possessions and have bought these three jewels—a sapphire, a ruby, and a pearl. I intend to present them as my tribute to the King." He said, "I invite you to make the pilgrimage with us that we may worship the newborn King together."

While he was speaking he thrust his hand into the innermost fold of his girdle and drew out three great gems—one blue as a fragment of the night sky, one redder than a ray of the sunrise, and one as pure as the peak of a snow mountain at twilight. He would give them all to the King.

Then one of Artaban's friends said, "Artaban, this is a vain dream. No King will ever rise from the broken race of Israel. He who looks for Him is a chaser of shadows." Then he bid Artaban farewell and left his dwelling.

Each in turn offered his own particular excuse, and finally only his oldest and truest friend remained. He said, "Artaban, I am too old for this quest, but my heart goes with thee." Then with a hand on Artaban's shoulder he said, "Those who would see wonderful things must often be willing to travel alone."

Left to himself, Artaban put his jewels back into his girdle. Then he parted the curtains and went out onto the roof to again take up his vigil watching the night sky.

As Jupiter and Saturn rolled together like drops of lambent flame about to blend into one, an azure spark was born out of the darkness beneath them, rounding itself with purple splendor into a crimson sphere.

Artaban bowed his head. "It is the sign," he said. "The King is coming, and I will go to meet him."

All night long Vasda, the swiftest of Artaban's horses, had been waiting saddled and bridled in her stall, pawing the ground impatiently and shaking her bit as if she shared the eagerness of her master's purpose. As Artaban placed himself upon her back, he said, "God bless us both. Keep our feet from falling and our souls from death."

Under this encouragement, each day his faithful horse measured off the allotted proportion of the distance, and at nightfall of the tenth day, they approached the outskirts of Babylon. In a little island of desert palm trees, Vasda scented difficulty and slackened her pace. Then with quick pant of anxiety, she stood stock-still, quivering in every muscle.

Artaban dismounted. The dim starlight revealed the form of a man lying in the roadway. His humble dress and haggard face showed him to be one of the poor Hebrew exiles who still dwelt in Babylon. His pallid skin bore the mark of the deadly fever that ravished the marshlands of Babylon at this season of the year. The chill of death was in his lean hand.

As Artaban turned to go, a sigh came from the sick man's lips, and the brown bony fingers closed convulsively upon the Magi's robe. Artaban felt sorry that he could not stay to minister to this dying stranger, but this was the hour toward which his entire life had been directed. He could not forfeit the reward of his years of study and faith to do a single deed of human mercy. But then, how could he leave his fellow man alone to die?

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

Then Artaban gave him all he had left of his bread and wine. He left a potion of healing herbs and instructions for his care.

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

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

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

The door of one dwelling was open, and

Artaban could hear a mother singing a lullaby to her child. He entered and introduced himself. The woman told him that it was now the third day since the three wise men had appeared in Bethlehem. They had found Joseph and Mary and the young Child, and had laid their gifts at His feet. Then they had disappeared as mysteriously as they had come.

Joseph had also taken his wife and child and secretly fled. It was whispered that they were going far away into Egypt.

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

Artaban went to the doorway. A band of soldiers came hurrying down the street with dripping swords and bloody hands. The captain approached the door to thrust Artaban aside, but Artaban did not stir. His face was as calm as though he were still watching the stars. Finally his outstretched hand revealed the giant ruby. He said, "I am waiting to give this jewel to the prudent captain who will go on his way and leave this house alone." The captain, amazed at the splendor of the gem, took it and said to his men, "March on! There are no children here."

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

But the woman who was weeping for joy in the shadows behind him said softly, "Because thou hast saved the life of my little one, may the Lord bless thee and keep thee. May the Lord make His face to shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee. May the Lord lift up His countenance upon thee and give thee peace."

Then Artaban, still following the King, went on into Egypt, seeking everywhere for traces of the little family that had fled be-

fore him from Bethlehem. For many years we follow Artaban in his search. We see him at the pyramids. We see him in an obscure house in Alexandria, taking counsel with a Hebrew rabbi who told him to seek the King not among the rich but among the poor. Then we follow him from place to place.

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

Once we see Artaban for a moment as he stood alone at sunrise, waiting at the gate of a Roman prison. From its secret resting place in his bosom he had taken the last of the jewels that he was saving for the king. Shifting gleams of azure and rose trembled upon its surface. It seemed to have absorbed some of the colors of the lost sapphire and ruby. Just as a noble life draws into itself its profound purpose, so that all that has helped it is transfused into its very essence, so the pearl had become more precious because it had long been carried close to the warmth of a beating human heart.

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

It was the season of the Passover and the city was thronged with strangers. There was a singular agitation visible in the multitude. A secret human tide was sweeping them to-

ward the Damascus Gate.

Artaban inquired where they were going. One answered, "We are going to the execution on Golgotha, outside the city walls. Two robbers are to be crucified, and with them another called Jesus of Nazareth, a Man who has done many wonderful works among the people. But the priests and elders have said that He must die, because He claims to be the Son of God. Pilate was persuaded by them to send Him to the cross, because He said that He was the 'King of the Jews.'"

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

Artaban's heart beat loudly within him. He thought, "The ways of God are stranger than the thoughts of men, and it may be that I shall yet find the King, and be able to ransom Him from death by giving my treasure to His enemies."

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

"Have pity on me!" she cried. "Save me, for the sake of the God of purity! My father was also of the Magi but he is dead, and I am to be sold as a slave to pay his debts."

Artaban trembled as he again felt the old conflict arising in his soul. It was the same that he had experienced in the palm grove of Babylon and in the cottage at Bethlehem. Twice the gift which he had consecrated to the King had been drawn from his hand to the service of humanity. Would he now fail

again? One thing was clear: He must rescue this helpless child from evil.

He took the pearl from his bosom. Never had it seemed so luminous, so radiant, so full of tender, living luster. He laid it in the hand of the slave and said, "Daughter, this is the ransom. It is the last of my treasures which I had hoped to keep for the King."

While he yet spoke, the darkness of the sky thickened and the shuddering tremors of an earthquake ran through the ground. The houses rocked. The soldiers fled in terror.

Artaban sank beside a protecting wall. What had he to fear? What had he to hope for? He had given away the last remnant of his tribute to the King. The quest was over and he had failed. What else mattered? As one lingering pulsation of the earthquake quivered beneath him, a heavy tile, shaken from the roof, fell and struck him on the temple. He lay breathless and pale.

The rescued girl leaned over him, fearing that he was dead. Then there came a still, small voice through the twilight. It was like distant music. The notes were clear, but the girl could not understand the words.

Then the lips of Artaban began to move, as if in answer to this voice, and she heard him say, "Not so, my Lord; for when saw I Thee hungered and fed Thee? Or thirsty, and gave Thee drink? When saw I Thee a stranger and took Thee in? Or naked, and clothed Thee? When saw I Thee sick or in prison, and came unto Thee? Thirty-three years have I looked for Thee, but I have never seen Thy face, nor ministered unto Thee, my King."

As he ceased, the sweet voice came again. And again the maid heard it, very faintly and far away. But now she understood the words, which said, "Verily, I say unto thee, that inasmuch as thou hast done it unto one of the least of these My brethren, thou hast done it unto Me."