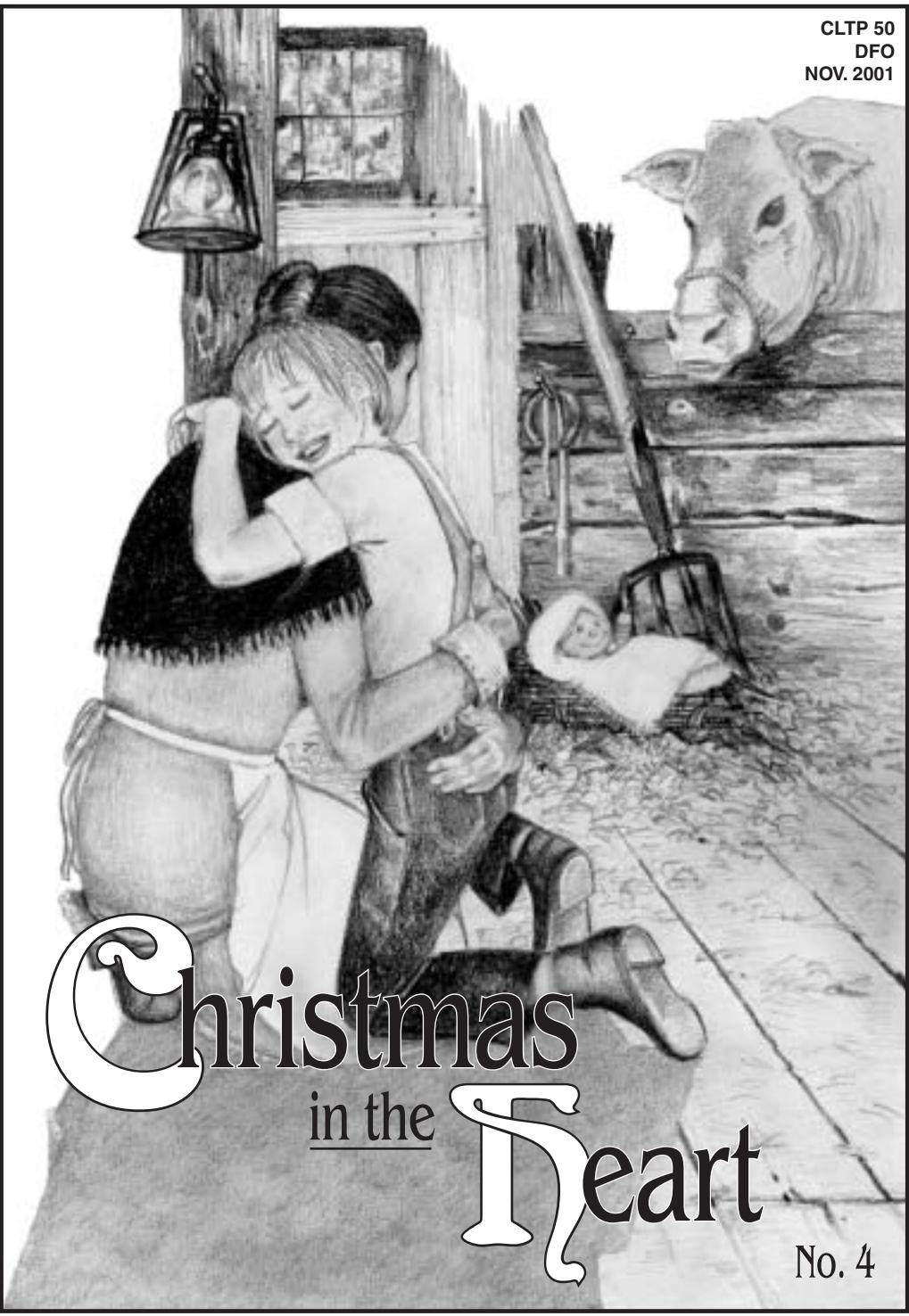


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# Christmas in the Heat

No. 4

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## A Different Kind of Christmas

By Lael J. Littke

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Martha had tried to ignore the approach of Christmas. It was fairly easy, what with all the work to do around the cabin—the meals to prepare, the rugs to braid to cover the earthen floors, the lye soap to make, the snow to keep cleared away from the door, and the myriad of other things necessary to sustain life in the bleak valley. She would have kept it almost entirely out of her thoughts if Jed had not come eagerly into the cabin one day, stomping the snow from his cold feet as he said in an excited voice, “Martha, we’re going to have a Christmas tree this year anyway. I spotted a cedar on that rise out south of the wheat field, over near the Nortons’ place. It’s a scrubby thing, but it will do, since we can’t get a pine. Maybe Christmas will be a little different here, but it will still be Christmas.”

It was a two-day journey from their home on the floor of the wide valley to the mountains where there were pine trees, and none of the settlers felt they could spare the time that busy first year to go after trees. Besides, the snow was too high to do any unnecessary travel.

As she shook her head, Martha noticed that Daniel glanced quickly up from the corner where he was playing, patiently tying together some sticks with bits of string left over from the quilt she had tied a few days earlier. She drew Jed as far away from the boy as possible.

“I don’t want a tree,” she said. “We won’t be celebrating Christmas. Even a tree couldn’t make it the kind of Christmas we used to have.”

Jed’s face set in lines that were becoming familiar.

“Martha, we’ve got to do something. For the boy, at least. Christmas means so much to children.”

“Don’t you think I know? All those years of fixing things for Maybelle and Stellie? I know all about kids and Christmas.” She stopped and drew a deep breath, glancing over to see that Daniel was occupied and not listening. “But I can’t do those things for him. It would be like a knife in my heart, fixing a tree and baking cookies and making things for—for another woman’s child when my own girls are back there on that prairie.”

“Martha, Martha,” Jed said softly. “It’s been almost a year and a half. That’s all over, and Danny needs you. He needs a Christmas like he remembers.”

She turned her back to his pleading face. “I can’t,” she said. “Besides, what could he remember? He was only a little more than five when his own mother died, and I don’t think his pa did much last Christmas.”

Jed touched her shoulder gently. “I know how hard it is for you, Martha. But think of the boy.” He turned and went back out into the snowy weather.

*Think of the boy.* Why should she think of him when her own children, her two blue-eyed, golden-curled daughters, had been left beside the trail back there on that endless, empty prairie? The boy came to her not because she wanted him but because she couldn’t say no to the bishop back in Salt Lake City last April before they came

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(For 9 years old and up. Selected stories

may be read with younger children at parents’ discretion.) Cover art by Rain.

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to settle in this valley. Bishop Clay had brought Daniel to her and Jed one day and said, "I want you to care for this lad. His mother died on the trek last summer and his pa passed away last week. He needs a good home."

Jed had gripped the bishop's hand and with tears in his eyes thanked him, but Martha had turned away from the sight of the thin, ragged, six-year-old boy who stood before them, not fast enough, however, to miss the sudden brief smile he flashed at her, a smile that should have caught her heart and opened it wide. Her heart was closed, though, locked tightly around the memory of her two gentle little girls. She didn't want a noisy, rowdy boy banging around, disturbing those memories, filling the cabin with a boy's loud games.

Yet she had taken him, because she felt she had no choice. Faced with the bishop's request—more of an order, really—and Jed's obvious joy, she couldn't refuse.

He came with them out to this new valley west of the Salt Lake settlement and had proved himself a great help to Jed, despite his young age. Sometimes Martha felt pity for him, but she didn't love him.

With Jed it was different. He had accepted Daniel immediately as his own son and enjoyed having the boy with him. They had a special relationship, a secret sharing that sometimes shut Martha out and made her wonder once, when she could bear to think of it, how Jed had felt about somehow seeming to be just outside the charmed circle she and her daughters had formed. Not that she really resented Jed and Daniel's relationship—she was glad Jed gave the boy some attention since she so often ignored him. But sometimes she felt that Jed had grown to love the boy more than he did her.

She told him as much one evening after the man and boy had come laughing together into the cabin only to sober up when they saw her, but not before one of those quick smiles from Daniel, the smile she was never sure had actually been there, it was gone so fast.

When Daniel went back outside for a bucket of water, Martha spoke to Jed. "Seems as if you enjoy the boy's company more than you do mine these days."

Jed didn't look her quite squarely in the eye. "That's not so, Martha."

"The two of you laughing together all the time. You never laugh with me anymore."

His voice was quiet. "You don't seem to find much to laugh about lately, Martha."

It was true, of course. When the girls were with them they had been a happy family, laughing at humor and hardship alike. It just seemed as if all her laughter had also been buried on that grim morning back on the desolate prairie.

"I'm sorry, Jed," Martha said. "I just can't seem to forget my girls. I can't feel that close to Daniel. He's always so serious around me. Almost like he's afraid. Calls me 'Aunt Martha.' I notice he calls you 'Pa.' Did you tell him to call you that?"

"No. He just started doing it. He's just a little fellow, Martha, but he knows how people feel about him. He needs more than just a full stomach and a place to sleep."

"I know," she said. "I know." She was ashamed that she could deny love to a child. Any child. She tried harder after that, but she found she was always comparing him with her daughters. They had been soft and yielding, a pleasure to hold close. Daniel was bony and wiry, and his small body was hard-muscled from the work he did with Jed. The girls had been golden-curled and had taken pride in keeping their little

pinafores neat and clean. Daniel was always grimy; he seemed to attract dirt, and his shirt always hung out from his overalls. The girls had liked to play quietly in the house with their rag dolls. Daniel preferred the outdoors, where he had full-scale, one-man battles, playing the parts of both settlers and Indians and making enough noise for any real fight.

It seemed as if he was always doing something to plague her. Not intentionally, to be sure. At least Jed said not. "Just the high spirits and imagination of a boy," Jed said. There was the time he took her best-tied quilt outside to build a tepee by the creek bank. By the time she found it, it was muddy and bedraggled and had to be laboriously washed.

Another day he got into the trunk she had brought across the plains and was playing with the carved wooden animals Grandpa Elliot had made for Maybelle and Stellie. She couldn't bear to see them in his hands and had scolded him soundly for opening the trunk. Another day he pulled up most of the flowers she had grown from the precious seeds brought from Nauvoo. He said he wanted to surprise her by pulling the weeds, but he couldn't tell which were weeds and which were flowers. He broke precious dishes and tore clothes that could not easily be replaced. And so Martha told Jed that she wanted him to take Daniel back to Salt Lake on his next trip for supplies and to give him back to Bishop Clay.

Jed looked at her for a long time before he answered, "Yes, maybe that would be best. For the boy's sake. I'll take him when I go in January."

Daniel seemed to sense something, because he tried to please her after that and was careful not to annoy her. When winter came and he had to be indoors much of the time, he tried to play quietly, although

occasionally the natural inclinations of a boy took over and he had to be reprimanded. Martha wished that Sister Norton had been able to establish the school for the children of the settlers, but she had been unable to get any slates or copy books and had decided to wait until the next fall.

Daniel mentioned Christmas only once. One day it was too cold and snowy to play outside, and he had been humming softly to himself as he played in his corner. Suddenly he looked up at Martha and asked, "Can you sing, Aunt Martha?"

Martha paused and straightened up from the table where she was kneading bread. She used to sing for her girls all the time.

"No, I can't, Daniel," she said. "Not any more."

"My mother used to sing a pretty song at Christmas," he said. "I wish I could remember it."

He said nothing more, and she did not question him. She didn't want to stir up any further memories of Christmas, since she didn't intend to observe the day. Perhaps he did recall snatches of past Christmases, but certainly he wouldn't remember enough that it would make any difference to him.

Martha couldn't help thinking of Christmases past as the day approached. Three years ago had been the best one, before the persecution of the Saints in Nauvoo\* got so bad. Maybelle had been seven then, and Stellie five. She had made rag dolls for them with pretty, flouncy dresses and cunning little bonnets. That was the year Grandpa Elliot had given them the carved animals and had also carved a beautiful little toy horse and carriage for Maybelle, promising Stellie he'd make her one when she was seven. (*\*Nauvoo, Illinois: A center of the Mormon faith in the 1830s.*)

Dwelling as she did in her past memo-

ries, Martha paid very little attention to Daniel those last few days before Christmas. He went in and out with Jed and she didn't attempt to keep track of him. On the day before Christmas, Jed went through the deep snow to do some chores for Brother Norton, who was ill. Daniel was alone outside most of the day, although he made several rather furtive trips in and out of the cabin. On one trip he took the sticks he had been tying together.

Toward evening Martha went out to the stable to milk Rosie, since Jed had not yet returned. As she approached, she saw there was a light inside. Opening the door softly, she peered within. Daniel had lit the barn lantern, and within its glow he knelt in the straw by Rosie's stall. In front of him were the sticks he had tied together, which Martha recognized now as a crude cradle. It held Stellie's rag doll, all wrapped up in the white shawl Martha kept in her trunk, the shawl she had used to wrap her babies. Her impulse was to rush in and snatch it, but she stopped, because the scene was strangely beautiful in the soft light from the lantern. Rosie and the two sheep stood close by, watching Daniel. He seemed to be addressing them when he spoke.

"The shepherds came following the star," he was saying. "And they found the baby Jesus who had been born in a stable." He paused for a moment, then went on. "And his mother loved him."

Martha felt suddenly that she couldn't breathe. Another mother, another day, had loved her little boy and had told him the beautiful story of the Christ Child with such love that he hadn't forgotten it, young as he was. And she, Martha, had failed that mother.

In the silence she began to sing. "Silent night," she sang. "Holy night."

Daniel didn't move until the song was

finished. Then he turned with that quick, heart-melting smile.

"That's the one," he whispered. "That's the song that my mother used to sing to me."

Martha ran forward and gathered the boy into her arms. He responded immediately, clasping his arms tightly around her.

"Danny," Martha said, "it's beautiful. Your cradle and little scene here."

"You never called me Danny before," he murmured, his head against her neck.

"I didn't do a lot of things," she said. As she held him close, the bands around her heart seemed to loosen and break.

"Danny," she said, sitting on the edge of Rosie's manger, "let's go in and get the cabin ready for Christmas. Maybe it isn't too late for Jed—for Pa to get that tree. It might be a little different kind of Christmas, but it will still be a little like the Christmases we used to know. We'll set up your cradle with the Christ Child in it under the tree, because that's what Christmas is all about."

"Do you mind it being different?" Danny asked. "I mean with a boy instead of your girls?"

Martha wondered how long it would take her to make up to him for the hurts she had inflicted these many months. "No," she said. "After all, the Baby Jesus was a boy."

"That's right," he said wonderingly.

"I'll open my trunk," said Martha. "We'll get out those carved animals to put around your manger scene. We'll string some dried berries to put on the tree, and when it's all done the three of us will sing 'Silent Night' and Pa will tell us the story of the Christ Child."

She thought about the lovely little carved horse and carriage Maybelle had loved so much, and knew it would be the perfect gift

to put under the tree for Danny's Christmas morning.

She set him down on the floor and put her arm around his shoulders.

"Merry Christmas," she said. "Merry Christmas, Danny."

He looked up at her with a smile that did not fade quickly away this time, a sweet smile full of the love he had been waiting to give her.

"Merry Christmas," he said, and then added softly, "Mother."

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*Most of the time we think of giving as packages wrapped in paper and topped with pretty bows, but these are not the most precious gifts we can give. To give of our love and care to those whom we don't even know; to share, to uplift, to aid and assist another whom we will probably never see or hear of again—this is a deeper form of giving. Joseph Campbell said, "When we quit thinking primarily about ourselves and our own self-preservation, we undergo a truly heroic transformation of consciousness."*

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## The Christmas Man

By Rachel Dyer Montross

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Last Christmas was a very difficult time for me. My family and all of my close friends were back home in Florida, and I was all alone in a rather cold California. I was working too many hours and became very sick.

I was working a double shift at the Southwest Airlines ticket counter, it was about 9:00 p.m. on Christmas Eve, and I was feeling really miserable inside. There were a few of us working and very few customers waiting to be helped. When it was time for me to call the next person to the counter, I looked up to see the sweetest-looking old man standing with a cane. He walked very slowly over to the counter and in the faintest voice told me that he had to go to New Orleans.

I tried to explain to him that there were no more flights that night and that he would have to go in the morning. He looked so confused and very worried. I tried to find out more information by asking if he had a reservation or if he remembered when he was supposed to travel, but he seemed to

become more confused with each question. He just kept saying, "She said I have to go to New Orleans."

After much time, I was able to at least find out that this old man was dropped off at the curb on Christmas Eve by his sister-in-law and told to go to New Orleans, where he had family. She had given him some cash and told him just to go inside and buy a ticket. When I asked if he could come back tomorrow, he said that she was gone and that he had no place to stay. He then said he would wait at the airport until tomorrow.

Naturally, I felt a little ashamed. Here I was feeling very sorry for myself about being alone on Christmas, when this angel named Clarence MacDonald was sent to me to remind me of what being alone really meant. It broke my heart.

Immediately, I told him we would get it all straightened out, and our Customer Service agent helped to book him a seat for the earliest flight the next morning. We gave him the senior citizens' fare, which gave

him some extra money for traveling. About this time he started to look very tired, and when I stepped around the counter to ask him if he was all right, I saw that his leg was wrapped in bandages. He had been standing on it that whole time, holding a plastic bag full of clothes.

I called for a wheelchair. When the wheelchair came, we helped him in, and then noticed a small amount of blood on his bandage. I asked how he hurt his leg, and he said that he just had bypass surgery and an artery was taken from his leg. Can you imagine? This man had had heart surgery, and then shortly afterward, was dropped off at the curb to buy a ticket with no reservation to fly to New Orleans, alone!

I had never been in a situation like this, and I wasn't sure what I could do. I went back to ask my supervisors if we could find a place for him to stay. They both said yes. They obtained a hotel voucher for Mr. MacDonald for one night and a meal ticket for dinner and breakfast. When I returned, we got his plastic bag of clothes and cane together and gave the porter a tip to take him downstairs to wait for the airport shuttle. I bent down to explain the hotel, food, and itinerary again to Mr. MacDonald, and then patted him on the arm and told him everything would be just fine.

As he left he said, "Thank you," bent his head, and started to cry. I cried too.

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## Broken Windows

By Katherine Paterson  
(From *Angels and Other Strangers*)

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There was something dreadfully wrong with the Sunday sermon, but Philip, for all his thirty-five years in the pulpit ministry and ten years as senior pastor of prestigious First Church, couldn't put his finger on the trouble. He was sure that if he asked his wife, she would say it was the text. Grace was always generous with constructive criticism. "It's a text for Lent," she would say.

On the other hand, Mike, his assistant until last month, would have congratulated Philip on the text, while secretly laughing at him for choosing it. Mike was one of those young men determined to out-Christian the Bible. It was always good for a wealthy downtown church to have a social radical like Mike around, but—Philip sighed despite himself—something of a relief when he went on to become someone else's

noisy conscience.

The text in question was Psalm 51, verse 17: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise." The older members of the congregation did love to hear the King James, but perhaps it would help him now also to read it in the Revised Standard Version. "The sacrifice acceptable to God," read the RSV, "is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise."

Grace would say it was a strange choice for the Sunday before Christmas, but he wouldn't tell her ahead of time. It was better that way. The problem, he knew, was not with the text. It exactly fit the Christmas story: Zacharias and Elizabeth, Joseph and Mary, the humble shepherds, even the kings of the East—broken and

contrite spirits offered up to God. So why wasn't it working? Why was the taste of the words like Shredded Wheat without milk?

He got up, the sermon in his hand, and began to pace the study. Perhaps if he read it aloud: "When Zacharias entered the sanctuary that day to offer up the incense..."

Crash! He ducked instinctively, which was a good thing because he could feel the baseball brush his hair as it flew over. It was stopped by the plaque from the Rotary Club commemorating his presidency. Philip paused only long enough to pick up the ball and then raced out the door.

By the time he got around to the patch of lawn, the children were long gone, of course. The damp grass was full of their damaging footprints, and above, the jagged glass of the study window sparkled in the late afternoon sun.

He allowed himself the luxury of a curse. How many times had he chased children off the last square of grass left to the church? And now the window. There was no one he could get to fix it on a Saturday afternoon, and with Christmas so near, there was probably no way of getting it repaired for a week or more. He was about to return to his study when he realized that the little vandals had left something behind. He walked over to investigate.

Philip picked the object up and immediately regretted doing so. The thing was filthy and gave off a distinct odor. One paw was gone and another going, but Philip could tell that at one time it had passed for a bear. When his own children had been young, they had had teddy bears. Becky had slept with one of the silly things for years.

"At's my brother's bear," a voice said. Philip looked down into a runny-nosed face.

The boy was about nine or ten, although since his own children were grown, he had trouble guessing ages.

"At's my brother's bear," the boy said again, sticking out a skinny arm.

"Just a minute," Philip said. "You're the very person I was looking for."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. What about that window, young man?"

"I don't know nothing about no window. I just come to get my brother's bear."

"Which he dropped while you were running away."

The boy's eyes flickered defensively. "I don't know about no window."

"Well, I think I'll just keep the bear and the baseball until you remember."

"What do you want with that stinking bear?"

Philip coughed. He was beginning to feel like a fine actor caught in a bad play. "You children," he said in a voice that a Shakespearean actor would have envied, "you children have repeatedly been asked not to play on the church lawn. You've ruined what little grass there was, and now you've broken a window."

"I don't know nothing."

"You said that before. But I should like to talk to your parents about who is to pay for this window you know nothing about."

The boy shrugged. "The preacher never said nothing about us playing here."

"Young man, I am the preacher."

"The other one."

He must mean Mike. Of course. Mike would have organized Little League on the church's patch of lawn given half a chance. "That preacher is no longer with us."

The boy snuffled, shifting his weight from foot to foot. Out of the side of his eye,

Philip could see a small child half-hidden behind the corner of the building. The owner of the bear, no doubt.

"If you want the bear," Philip said loudly, "bring your parents to see me in my office. It's the room," he added, lowering his head toward the boy's, "with the broken window." He straightened, turned, and strode inside, telling himself that the whole problem with the world these days was that children were never made to take responsibility for their actions. Later, as he taped a patch of plastic wrap over the hole, he wondered if he had done the right thing. It did seem small, keeping the little boy's toy, but then again...

He had gone back to the sermon, almost forgetting about the window, when the outside bell rang. He got up impatiently. All the church doors remained locked for security, and when there was no secretary here, it was worse than annoying to have to see who was at the door.

A woman was there with the two boys. "Oh," he said. "Come in."

She hesitated. "Bobby says you got Wayne's bear." She sounded angry.

"Let's talk about it in the office, shall we?" He felt the need for time.

The woman sat perched on the edge of the chair he offered. The children stood close to her.

"The problem," Philip began, "is that the church lawn is really not a public park."

"The other reverend never cared," she said.

"Yes. Well, you see, there isn't enough room. And there are the windows. . . ."

"I don't have no money," she said. "My husband's been out of work for weeks and now he's gone. I don't know where." She spoke sharply as though her misfortunes were somehow to be blamed on Philip. "The kids ain't going to have no Christmas

as t's. They understand that. But they don't understand why Wayne can't have his bear. That's the meanest thing I ever heard of. Wayne's had that bear since before he could walk." She looked Philip up and down. "Here's this five-year-old kid. His daddy's done took off just before Christmas. He ain't gonna have any Santa Claus. And this big preacher steals his teddy bear. I hope to God that makes you happy."

"Mrs. . . . Mrs. . . . I don't want his bear, for heaven's sake."

"Where's that other reverend? Lord, when we was in trouble before, he used to help us out, not steal..."

"Mr. Coates has moved to another congregation."

"So? That figures." She stood up so abruptly that she nearly knocked the two boys over. "I guess you might as well say goodbye to your teddy bear, Wayne. I'm sure the reverend got better things to do than talk to us."

"Now look here, Mrs. . . . Mrs. . . ."

"You don't care what my name is!"

"If you'd give me a chance, I would. Just sit down, will you?"

Again she nearly knocked her sons over, but she did sit down.

Philip went over to his desk and got the bear. He took it to the smaller child. "I'm sorry I made you unhappy, Wayne. Here's your bear."

The boy looked at Philip as though he suspected some foul trick and then snatched the bear.

Philip sat down. "Now, Mrs. . . ."

"Slaytor," she said.

"Mrs. Slaytor. I . . . we . . . the church would like very much to know how we might help."

By the time they left, he had given Mrs. Slaytor money out of his own pocket to

buy groceries, and as soon as they were gone, he called the head of the service committee and asked her about arranging for presents for the Slaytor's Christmas.

"Oh," the woman laughed when he told her a rough outline of what had happened, "some of Mike's Miserables, eh?"

"Mike's what?"

"Mike's Miserables. He was always after us to help them. He had this little pep talk about the church caring for those who lived in 'the shadow of her spire.' We called them Mike's Miserables. Not so poetic, but more descriptive. He had quite a little collection of them."

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The Sunday before Christmas was always a wonderful day at First Church. Years before, someone had donated an almost life-sized crèche, which was placed in the left alcove of the huge sanctuary. The figures had been carved out of Philippine mahogany, and a church member had worked out a setting that made the Holy Family appear as though outlined within a cave. A light shone up from the manger into the face of the mother. In the right alcove stood a giant Christmas tree shimmering in white and silver. The choir loft was banked with red poinsettias, and the great candelabras were lit.

The Christmas Sunday sermon went well. Perhaps the little episode with the Slaytors had helped him, Philip thought. They had even come to church that morning, the three of them still looking a bit defiant. All in all, it was a wonderful service. He shook every hand that passed him at the back, and then started across the length of the sanctuary toward the robing room. Something about the crèche light caught his attention. Maybe the bulb was weak. He went over to investigate.

He saw at once that there was an object

on top of the light. He could hardly believe his eyes. It was his nose that convinced him. Wayne Slaytor's bear was lying in the manger.

Philip didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. Why? Why? He had been glad to help the Slaytors out—the money, the arrangements—but now he had other things he must do. He tried to think of the bear as a little child's thank-you to God. It didn't work. The bear meant something else.

He took Grace home, got a hurried lunch, and drove back downtown. The bear was in a shopping bag, but its aroma filled the car. The green Buick suddenly seemed very long and very new as it pulled up in front of the dirty brick apartment house. He breathed a prayer and went in.

The Slaytors were on the fourth floor. He climbed the stairs slowly. At sixty he thought of himself as still vigorous, but even so, four floors were a bit of exercise. The whole building smelled like Wayne's bear.

Mrs. Slaytor answered his knock. "I ... uh ... seem to have Wayne's bear again," he said, holding out the bag.

"He tolle me he left it at church."

"May I come in?"

"I guess." She stepped back. "Boys, turn off the TV. The reverend's here."

They didn't obey, but they both turned to look at him.

"I brought back your bear, Wayne," Philip said, taking it out of the shopping bag and offering it to the child.

Wayne shrank back, shaking his head.

"Thank the reverend, Wayne."

Wayne just shook his head.

"He don't want it, Reverend," his brother said. "He give it to God."

"Lord, Wayne. God don't want that smelly old bear. Now thank the reverend."

Philip went over and knelt down by the boy's stool. "What's the matter, Wayne?"

The child's eyes filled with tears. He squeaked out something totally unintelligible.

Philip turned to Bobby. "What did he say?"

"He said he want his daddy."

"Oh."

"That's how come he give the bear to God. So as God would send back his daddy for Christmas."

"Lord, Wayne. You better leave God alone. He ain't got time for your foolishness. Ain't that right, Reverend?"

"Well..."

"See, Wayne? Reverend know all about God, and he knows God don't mess with people like us. Right, Reverend?"

"Well..."

"You just make God mad acting like that. See, the reverend knows I'm right. You can't bribe God with no teddy bear. Right, Reverend?"

"Yes ... no!" The woman would drive him wild. He knelt as close to the now-weeping child as he could. "Listen, Wayne," he said softly. "God knows you love that bear, and He knows you love your daddy. He's not mad at you."

The boy cried harder. Words were coming through the sobs, but God alone knew what they were. God and Bobby, that is.

"He wants you to find his daddy and bring him home," Bobby said.

"Me?"

"The other preacher used to do that sometimes."

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The next morning Philip began calling—the police, the hospital, the Salvation Army shelter. No one knew anything about Richard Slaytor's whereabouts, although

the Salvation Army had met up with him before and promised to keep an eye out. Well, it was the best he could do. There was still the Christmas Eve service to prepare for, and Grace needed him to help complete the preparations at home. The children and their families were coming over Christmas afternoon.

He was working frantically and tardily on his sermon for the evening and had given strict orders that he was not to be disturbed when the boys appeared. He never knew how they got past his secretary, but they did. Bobby had Wayne by the hand, and Wayne was dragging the one-armed bear.

"Didn't find him yet, huh, Reverend?"

"No"—Philip cleared his throat—I called and called. No one has seen him."

Bobby stepped forward. "We figured you need a picture."

"A picture?"

"Yeah. How you going to know it's him if you don't have no picture?" The boy handed him a faded snapshot of a smiling young couple at the beach. "That's him." Bobby pointed to the man in swimming trunks. "The other one's my mother."

"I see."

"I done wrote out all the information on the back." He turned the photo over. In smudged pencil Philip read:

Mr. Richard Slaytor  
3476 Fifth St. Apt. 4-D  
Tel. 465-6879  
Eyes blue Hair brown Size tall

"That's so you can identify him."

"I see."

"Wayne wants to know if you need the bear back."

"No, no. That's all right, Wayne. I think I can manage without the bear, thank you."

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He must be out of his mind. It was nearly dark. He had a midnight service that he wasn't ready for. His wife was having guests for supper. And here he was, walking the city streets, peering into doorways, showing a faded snapshot to drunks. "Do you know this man? Have you seen him lately?"

As he showed the picture, the stench would assault his nostrils. Several times he thought he would surely be sick and would have to turn hurriedly away. He tried bartenders and passersby, and as the evening wore on and he got more desperate, he approached the streetwalkers. First, they would flash him their sugar-hard smiles and then sneer when he made clear his mission.

It was so cold, his face hurt. He was tired of walking and bending and begging. There was no kindness in the street. The faces he met were as hard and chilled as the concrete beneath his feet. A damp wind snaked up the sleeves of his overcoat and pierced him through.

"Merry Christmas, Pop!"

He had only time to puzzle over the youngster's greeting before the crashing blow hit his head and he crumpled to the pavement.

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His first thought as he woke, the room spinning around him, was that he had died. *So, this is what death is like*, he was saying to himself matter-of-factly, when the pain surged and he had to blink hard against it. He was lying on a hard, very narrow cot. The smell was that of strong disinfectant, and the sight, when the pain allowed him to look at all, was that of bars. Then the pain surged, and he closed his eyes once more. When the pain ebbed slightly, he began to feel something else. He was dead, all

right. He was dead, but it was all right. He was both afraid and not afraid. He wanted to call out, "Who are you? What are you doing here?" But he was silent because he both knew and did not know the answer.

Then there was a voice. A perfectly ordinary human voice that said, "Your wife is here to take you home."

*Poor Grace! What must she be thinking?* He had called her once to tell her not to wait for him before having supper. Someone helped him to his feet, opened the door of the cage, and supported him down a hall lined with cages into a room so bright with light that he could hardly stand it.

He was dimly aware that there was a woman waiting, but he couldn't bear to open his eyes in that bright place.

"That ain't my husband," the woman's voice said. "My Lord! It's the reverend!"

Philip sat down. He had to. He was afraid he might start giggling. He was so tired and his head hurt so much that he wasn't sure he could control himself.

She began to swear at the police. "The poor man got mugged. Look at that bump on his head. Lord, don't you guys ever look before you drag somebody to jail?" She bent over him solicitously. "Don't you know better than to wander round after dark in a neighborhood like this? You could get hurt, Reverend."

He was too tired to reply. The police produced the snapshot with the address on the back. "This was all he had on him. I guess they stole everything else."

"Where'd you get this picture?" she asked Philip.

"The boys."

"Lord, Lord. You was out looking for Slaytor when they got you, right, Reverend? Did you ever hear the like?" she demanded. "Christmas Eve and the preacher is out

looking for some no good man 'cause his baby wants him home for Christmas." She shook her head. "If that don't beat all. We better get you to the emergency room and let them look at that bump."

"No," he said. He was feeling a little more in control. "I've got a midnight service. Just call a taxi and get me back to the church. I'll check with a doctor tomorrow."

He was never able to explain about the service. It might have been the injury, which proved to be a mild concussion, but it couldn't have been only that.

As he stood up and looked out over his beautiful, warmly dressed congregation, he saw among them a woman and two little boys and a one-armed bear. He had failed them, but there they were. They had understood. Even Wayne was smiling up at him, waiting to hear the Christmas story of God Who not only accepts the sacrifice

of a broken and contrite heart, but of God Who is Himself broken.

He had descended into Hell. Philip didn't say so aloud, but suddenly he knew what the words meant. Born in a stinking barn, friend of the poor, the prostitute, the thief—broken at last on a cross. He then descended into Hell. And just for a while, maybe for just this once in Philip's usually proper and comfortable life, God had let him be there, too. *I know*, Philip wanted to cry to those who sat before him, *I know what it is. Right, Lord? Didn't You let me see a glimpse of it?*

Just then Wayne held up the bear and made it wave its one remaining paw toward the pulpit. It was like a great Amen from a heavenly choir. God had not despised his puny little sacrifice. Philip's heart swelled with a joy that had no words, except, *Glory to God in the highest, and on Earth peace, good will toward men.*

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## Dear Admiral McDonald...

Author unknown

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Dear Admiral McDonald:

This letter is a year late. Nevertheless, it is important that you receive it. Eighteen people have asked me to be sure to write to you.

Last year at Christmas time, my wife, three boys and I were in France, on our way from Paris to Nice. For five wretched days everything had gone wrong. Our hotels were tourist traps, our rented car broke down, we were irritable and restless.

On Christmas Eve, when we checked into a hotel in Nice, there was no Christmas spirit in our hearts. It was cold and raining when we went out to eat. We found a drab little cafe, shoddily decorated for

the holiday.

Only five tables in the restaurant were occupied. There were two German couples, two French families and an American sailor by himself. In the corner a piano player listlessly played. I was too stubborn, too tired, and too miserable to leave.

I looked around and noticed that the other customers were eating in stony silence. The only person who seemed happy was the American sailor. He was writing a letter, smiling to himself.

My wife ordered our meal in French. The waiter brought us the wrong thing. I scolded my wife, she began to cry, and the boys defended her. Then on my left, at

the table of one French family, the father slapped one of his children for some minor fault; the boy cried. On our right, the German wife berated her husband.

All of us were suddenly interrupted by an unpleasant blast of cold air. Through the door came an old French flower woman. She wore a dripping, tattered overcoat, and shuffled in on wet, rundown shoes. Carrying her basket of roses she went from table to table. "Flowers?"

No one bought any, and wearily she sat at a table between the sailor and us.

To the waiter she said: "Bowl of soup. I haven't sold a flower the whole afternoon." To the piano player she said hoarsely: "Can you imagine, Joseph, ordering only a bowl of soup on Christmas Eve?"

Joseph pointed to his empty tipping plate. The young sailor finished his meal, and got up to leave. Putting on his coat, he walked over to the flower woman's table.

"Happy Christmas," he said smiling, and picking out two roses, he said, "How much are these?"

"Two francs, Monsieur."

Pressing one of the flowers into the letter he had written, he handed the woman a 20-franc note.

"I'll have to get some change, Monsieur," she said.

"No ma'am," said the sailor, kissing the ancient cheek. "This is my Christmas present to you."

Straightening up, he came to our table, holding the other rose in front of him. "Sir," he said to me, "may I present this to your beautiful daughter?"

In one quick motion he gave the rose to my wife, wished us a Merry Christmas and departed.

Everyone had stopped eating. Everyone had been watching the sailor. Everyone was

sitting in thoughtful silence.

A few seconds later, Christmas exploded through the restaurant like a bomb. The old flower woman jumped up waving her 20-franc note. Hobbling out into the middle of the room she did a jig, shouting to the piano player: "Joseph, my Christmas present! You shall have a feast too!"

With sudden enthusiasm the piano player began to play "Good King Wenceslas," beating the keys with magic hands, nodding his head to the rhythm. My wife waved her rose in time to the music. She was radiant, looking twenty years younger. The tears had left her eyes. She began to sing and our three sons joined in, bellowing loudly.

The Germans jumped on the chairs and began singing. The waiter embraced the flower woman. Waving their arms, they sang in French. The French man who had slapped the boy beat a rhythm with his fork against a bottle and the lad climbed on his lap. Then the owner of the restaurant started singing "The First Noel," and we all joined in, half of us crying as we sang.

People crowded in from the street until many were standing. The walls shook, as hands and feet kept time to the rousing Yuletide carols. A few hours before eighteen people had been spending a miserable evening in a shoddy restaurant. It ended up being our happiest Christmas Eve ever.

This, Admiral McDonald, is what I'm writing you about. As top man in the Navy you should know about the very special gift that the U.S. Navy gave to my family, to me, and to the other people in that French restaurant. Because your young sailor had Christmas spirit in his soul, he released the love and joy that had been smothered within us. He gave us Christmas.

Thank you, sir, very much.

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## A Mustard Seed Christmas

By Charlene Elizabeth Fairchild

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*What is the Kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches (Luke 13:18-19 NRSV).*

Last year our first Christmas decoration was a mustard seed. A lowly mustard seed, taped on a sheet of white paper to the center of our mantelpiece. It was a sign and a symbol of the fragile and tiny hope I had of celebrating Christmas. The hope was fragile and it was tiny because I did not “feel” like Christmas last year. How could I sing the Lord’s song in the strange Land of Grief?

It was the first Sunday in Advent\* and my husband and I were having our usual leisurely coffee brunch after all the duties of the morning and the noon hour. (*\*Advent: the four-week period leading up to Christmas, beginning on the fourth Sunday before Christmas Day*)

Two church services and the important weekly phone calls to my father and other family members were behind us for another week. My husband, rather gingerly, brought up the subject of Christmas, knowing that I was immersed in the full bloom of grief. Mom had died on Labor Day and this was the first Christmas to be marked without her. I did not “feel” like Christmas.

Despite my fog of misery, I knew that I was being somewhat self-absorbed in my pain. Life was going on all about me but, for the life of me, I couldn’t figure out how I was going to get through this time. Everybody was busy and happy and having parties and family gatherings. I shrank inside. The thought of smiling and pretending joy was beyond pain for me. What was I going to do?

I remembered the reading from Romans

that morning: “The night is far gone, the day is near. ... Let us put on the armor of light. ... Put on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 13:12, 14). The season celebrating His birth and looking for His coming again was upon me, and I was being called to participate. But it was beyond me to rejoice. As I said these things to my husband, he reminded me that God *is* able even if I was not. He mentioned the parable of the mustard seed to me. God could take that little mustard seed and make of it something worthy. God could take that tiny seed of faith and grow it into a kingdom of hope.

I felt as if I had been touched. I got up and went to the kitchen and rifled through my spices. Yes! There it was. My bottle of mustard seeds. I got one out and grabbed a piece of paper from the pad by our phone and taped that mustard seed to the center. I returned to the dining room, waving the paper triumphantly. “I’ve got it! I’ve got it! I *can* celebrate this year.”

My husband said, “Here, let’s put it up on the mantel. It’ll be our first Christmas decoration.” Up it went. Every time I looked at it, I was reminded of the hope it symbolized and the faith it embodied. I couldn’t do it on my own. But God could. And God did!

The mustard seed became a powerful witness in our house last year. Many people asked about it and it became a growing joy to share what it meant. The mustard seed again graces our mantelpiece to symbolize light in the darkness, hope in the face of grief and despair, and faith in the promises of God.

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## Grandma Ruby

By Lynn Robertson

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Being a mother of two very active boys, ages seven and one, I am sometimes worried about their making a shambles of my carefully decorated home. In their innocence and play, they occasionally knock over my favorite lamp or upset my well-designed arrangements. In these moments when chaos overrules calm, I remember the lesson I learned from my wise mother-in-law, Ruby.

Ruby is the mother of six and grandmother of 13. She is the embodiment of gentleness, patience, and love. One Christmas, all the children and grandchildren were gathered as usual at Ruby's home. Just the month before, Ruby had bought beautiful new white carpeting, after living with the "same old carpet" for over 25

years. She was overjoyed with the new look it gave her home.

My brother-in-law, Arnie, had just distributed his gifts for all the nieces and nephews—prized homemade honey from his beehives. They were excited. But as fate would have it, eight-year-old Sheena spilled her tub of honey on Grandma's new carpeting and trailed it throughout the entire downstairs of the house.

Crying, Sheena ran into the kitchen and into Grandma Ruby's arms. "Grandma, I've spilled my honey all over your brand-new carpet."

Grandma Ruby knelt down, looked tenderly into Sheena's tearful eyes and said, "Don't worry, sweetheart, we can get you more honey."

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## Christmas Roses

By Lenora P. Rutledge, RDH

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It was the afternoon of December 24, the day before Christmas, and as the newest dental hygienist in our office, I had to work. The only thing that brightened my day was the beautifully decorated Christmas tree in our waiting room and a gift sent to me by a fellow I was dating—a dozen long-stemmed red roses.

As I was cleaning my operatory, our receptionist came and said there was a lady in the front office who urgently needed to speak with me. As I stepped out, I noticed a young, tired-looking woman with an infant in her arms. Nervously, she explained that her husband—a prisoner in a nearby correctional facility—was my next patient. The guards were scheduled to bring him to

the office that afternoon.

She told me she wasn't allowed to visit her husband in prison and that he had never seen his son. Her plea was for me to let the boy's father sit in the waiting room with her as long as possible before I called him for his appointment. Since my schedule wasn't full, I agreed. After all, it was Christmas Eve.

A short time later, her husband arrived—with shackles on his feet, cuffs on his hands, and two armed guards as an escort. The woman's tired face lit up like our little Christmas tree when her husband took a seat beside her. I kept peeking out to watch them laugh, cry, and share their child.

After almost an hour, I called the prisoner back to the operatory. While I worked, the guards stood just outside my door. The patient seemed like a gentle and humble man. I wondered what he possibly could have done to be held under such conditions. I tried to make him as comfortable as possible.

At the end of the appointment, I wished him a Merry Christmas—a difficult thing to say to a man headed back to prison. He smiled and thanked me. He also said he

felt saddened by the fact he hadn't been able to get his wife anything for Christmas. On hearing this, I was inspired with a wonderful idea.

I'll never forget the look on both their faces as the prisoner gave his wife the beautiful, long-stemmed roses. I'm not sure who experienced the most joy—the husband in giving, the wife in receiving, or myself in having the opportunity to share in this special moment.

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## Through a Child's Eyes

Author unknown

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We were the only family with children in the restaurant. I sat Erik in a high chair and noticed everyone was quietly eating and talking. Suddenly, Erik squealed with glee and said, "Hi there!" He pounded his fat baby hands on the highchair tray. His eyes were wide with excitement and his mouth was bared in a toothless grin. He wriggled and giggled with merriment.

I looked around and saw the source of his merriment. It was a man with a tattered rag of a coat, dirty, greasy, and worn. His pants were baggy with a zipper at half-mast and his toes poked out of would-be shoes. His shirt was dirty and his hair was uncombed and unwashed. His whiskers were too short to be called a beard and his nose was so varicose it looked like a road map. We were too far from him to smell, but I was sure he smelled.

His hands waved and flapped on loose wrists. "Hi there, baby! Hi there, big boy! I see ya, buster," the man said to Erik.

My husband and I exchanged looks, *What do we do?*

Erik continued to laugh and answer, "Hi, hi there!" Everyone in the restaurant noticed

and looked at us and then at the man. The old geezer was creating a nuisance with my beautiful baby.

Our meal came and the man began shouting from across the room, "Do ya know patty cake? Do you know peek-a-boo? Hey, look, he knows peek-a-boo!" Nobody thought the old man was cute. He was obviously drunk. My husband and I were embarrassed. We ate in silence, all except for Erik, who was running through his repertoire for the admiring skid-row bum, who in turn, reciprocated with his comments.

We finally got through the meal and headed for the door. My husband went to pay the check and told me to meet him in the parking lot. The old man sat poised between me and the door. *Lord, just let me out of here before he speaks to me or Erik, I prayed.*

As I drew closer to the man, I turned my back trying to sidestep him and avoid any air he might be breathing. As I did, Erik leaned over my arm, reaching with both arms in a baby's "pick me up" position. Before I could stop him, Erik had propelled

himself from my arms to the man's.

Suddenly a very old smelly man and a very young baby expressed their love. Erik in an act of total trust, tenderness, and submission lay his tiny head upon the man's ragged shoulder. The man's eyes closed, and I saw tears hover beneath his lashes. His aged hands full of grime, pain, and hard labor gently, so gently, cradled my baby's bottom and stroked his back. No two beings have ever loved so deeply for so short a time. I stood awestruck. The old man rocked and cradled Erik in his arms for a moment, and then his eyes opened and set squarely on mine. He said in a firm commanding voice, "You take care of this baby."

Somehow I managed, "I will," from a throat that contained a stone.

He pried Erik from his chest, unwillingly, longingly, as though he were in pain.

I received my baby, and the man said, "God bless you, ma'am. You've given me my Christmas gift." I said nothing more than a muttered thanks.

With Erik in my arms, I ran for the car. My husband was wondering why I was crying and holding Erik so tightly, and why I was saying, "My God, my God, forgive me." I had just witnessed Christ's love shown through the innocence of a tiny child who saw no sin, who made no judgment, a child who saw a soul, and a mother who saw a suit of clothes.

I was a Christian who was blind, holding a child who was not. I felt it was God asking, "Are you willing to share your son for a moment?"—when He shared His for all eternity. The ragged old man, unwittingly, had reminded me, "To enter the Kingdom of God, we must become as little children."

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## Christmas Love

By Candy Chand

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Every year, I promised it would be different. Each December, I vowed to make Christmas a calm and peaceful experience. But once again, in spite of my plans, chaos prevailed. I had cut back on what I deemed nonessential obligations: extensive card writing, endless baking, Martha Stewart decorating, and, yes, even the all-American pastime, overspending. Yet still I found myself exhausted, unable to appreciate the precious family moments, and, of course, the true meaning of Christmas.

My son, Nicholas, was in kindergarten that year. It was an exciting season for a six-year-old, filled with hopes, dreams, and laughter. For weeks, he'd been memorizing songs for his school's upcoming Winter

Pageant.

I didn't have the heart to tell him I'd be working the night of the production. Not willing to miss his shining moment, I spoke with his teacher. She assured me there'd be a dress rehearsal in the morning, and that all parents unable to attend the evening presentation were welcome to enjoy it then. Fortunately, Nicholas seemed happy with the compromise.

So, just as I promised, I filed in ten minutes early, found a spot on the cafeteria floor and sat down. When I looked around the room, I saw a handful of parents quietly scampering to their seats. I began to wonder why they, too, were attending a dress rehearsal, but chalked it up to the chaotic

schedules of modern family life.

As I waited, the students were led into the building. Each class, accompanied by their teacher, sat crossed-legged on the floor. The children would become members of the audience as each group, one by one, rose to perform their song. Because the public school system had long stopped referring to the holiday as "Christmas," I didn't expect anything other than fun, commercial entertainment. The Winter Pageant was filled with songs of reindeer, Santa Claus, snowflakes and good cheer. The melodies were fun, cute, and lighthearted. But nowhere to be found was even the hint of an innocent babe, a manger, or Christ's precious, sacred gifts of life, hope and joy.

When my son's class rose to sing "Christmas Love," I was slightly taken aback by its bold title. However, within moments I settled in to watch them proudly begin their number. Nicholas was aglow, as were all of his classmates, adorned in fuzzy mittens, red sweaters and bright snowcaps upon their heads. Those in the front row, center stage, held up large letters, one by one, to spell out the title of the song. As the class would sing "C is for Christmas," a child would hold up the letter C. Then,

"H is for Happy," and on and on, until each child holding up his or her portion had presented the complete message, "Christmas Love."

The performance was going smoothly, until suddenly, we noticed her, a small, quiet girl in the front row holding the letter M, upside-down! She was entirely unaware that reversed, her letter M appeared as a W. She fidgeted from side to side, until she had moved away from her mark entirely. The audience of children snickered at this little one's mistake. In her innocence, she had no idea they were laughing at her and stood tall, proudly holding her W.

You can only imagine the difficulty in calming an audience of young, giggling children. Although many teachers tried to shush them, the laughter continued. It continued that is, until the moment the last letter was raised, and we all saw it together. A hush came over the audience and eyes began to widen. In that instant, we finally understood the reason we were there, why we celebrated in the first place, why even in the chaos, there was a purpose for our festivities. For, when the last letter was held high, the message read loud and clear, "CHRIST WAS LOVE." And, I believe, He still is.

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## A Boy Learns a Lesson

A true story from Thomas S. Monson

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*(Editor's note: Dear Family, we have no way of knowing if many of these stories are fiction or actual fact, but in this case it is clear that this story is part of the personal testimony of Mr. Monson, who is an elder in The Church of Latter Day Saints.)*

In about my tenth year, as Christmas approached, I longed for an electric train. The times were those of economic depression, yet Mother and Dad purchased for me

a lovely electric train.

Christmas morning bright and early I was thrilled when I received my train. The next few hours were devoted to operating

the transformer and watching the engine pull its cars forward and then backward around the track.

Mother said that she had purchased a windup train for Widow Hansen's boy, Mark, who lived down the lane at Gale Street. As I looked at his train, I noticed a tanker car that I so much admired. I put up such a fuss that my mother succumbed to my pleading and gave me the tanker car. I put it with my train set and felt pleased.

Mother and I took the remaining cars and the engine down to Mark Hansen. The boy was a year or two older than I. He had never anticipated such a gift, and

was thrilled beyond words. He wound the key in his engine, it not being electric nor expensive like mine, and was overjoyed as the engine and three cars, plus a caboose, went around the track.

I felt a horrible sense of guilt as I returned home. The tanker car no longer appealed to me. Suddenly, I took the tanker car in my hand, plus an additional car of my own, and ran all the way down to Gale Street. I proudly announced to Mark, "We forgot to bring two cars which belong to your train."

I don't know when a deed has made me feel any better than that experience as a ten-year-old boy.

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## The Bethlehem Keeper

By Amos K. Wells

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What could be done? The inn was full of folk: His Honor Marcus Lucius, and his scribes who made the census; honorable men from farthest Galilee who had come to be enrolled; high ladies and their lords; the rich; the rabbis. Such a noble thing Bethlehem had not seen before, and may not see again. And there they were, close herded with their servants, till the inn was like a hive at swarming time, and I was fairly crazed among them.

That they were so important—just the two—no servants, just a workman sort of man leading a donkey, and his wife thereon, drooping and pale ... I saw them not myself. My servants must have driven them away. But had I seen them, how was I to know?

Were inns to welcome stragglers, up and down in all our towns from Beersheba to Dan, till He should come? And how were

men to know? There was a sign, they say, a heavenly light resplendent; but I had no time for stars. And there were songs of angels in the air out on the hills. But how was I to hear amid the thousand clamors of an inn?

Of course, had I known then who they were, and who was He that should be born that night... For now I learn that they will make Him King, a second David who will ransom us from these Philistine Romans. Who but He that feeds an army with a loaf of bread? And if the soldier falls He touches him, and up he leaps uninjured!

Had I known, I would have turned the whole inn upside down—his Honor Marcus Lucius, and the rest, and sent them all to stables—had I known.

So if you have seen Him, stranger, and perhaps again will see Him, please say for me that I did not know. And if

He comes again, as He will surely come, with retinue and banners, and an army, tell my Lord that all my inn is His, to make amends.

Alas, alas! To miss a chance like that! This inn that might be chief among them all, this birthplace of Messiah, had I known!

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## A “Little Book” about Christmas

By Thomas J. Burns (Originally published in *Reader's Digest*, December 1989)

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*From its first publication in 1843, A Christmas Carol has charmed and inspired millions. Less well known is the fact that this little book of celebration grew out of a dark period in the author's career—and, in some ways, changed the course of his life forever.*

On an early October evening in 1843, Charles Dickens stepped from the brick and stone portico of his home near Regent's Park in London. The cool air of dusk was a relief from the day's unseasonal humidity, as the author began his nightly walk through what he called “the black streets” of the city.

A handsome man with flowing brown hair and normally sparkling eyes, Dickens was deeply troubled. The 31-year-old father of four had thought he was at the peak of his career. *The Pickwick Papers*, *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby* had all been popular; and *Martin Chuzzlewit*, which he considered his finest novel yet, was being published in monthly installments. But now, the celebrated writer was facing serious financial problems.

Some months earlier, his publisher had revealed that sales of the new novel were not what had been expected, and it might be necessary to sharply reduce Dickens's monthly advances against future sales.

The news had stunned the author. It seemed his talent was being questioned. Memories of his childhood poverty resurfaced. Dickens was supporting a large, extended family, and his expenses were

already nearly more than he could handle. His father and brothers were pleading for loans. His wife, Kate, was expecting their fifth child.

All summer long, Dickens worried about his mounting bills, especially the large mortgage that he owed on his house. He spent time at a seaside resort, where he had trouble sleeping and walked the cliffs for hours. He knew that he needed an idea that would earn him a large sum of money, and he needed the idea quickly. But in his depression, Dickens was finding it difficult to write. After returning to London, he hoped that resuming his nightly walks would help spark his imagination.

The yellow glow from the flickering gas lamps lit his way through London's better neighborhoods. Then gradually, as he neared the Thames River, only the dull light from tenement windows illuminated the streets, now litter-strewn and lined with open sewers. The elegant ladies and well-dressed gentlemen of Dickens's neighborhood were replaced by bawdy streetwalkers, pickpockets, and beggars.

The dismal scene reminded him of the nightmare that often troubled his sleep: *A 12-year-old boy sits at a worktable piled*

*high with pots of black boot paste. For 12 hours a day, six days a week, he attaches labels on the endless stream of pots to earn the six shillings that will keep him alive.*

*The boy in the dream looks through the rotting warehouse floor into the cellar, where swarms of rats scurry about. Then he raises his eyes to the dirt-streaked window, dripping with condensation from London's wintry weather. The light is fading now, along with the boy's young hopes. His father is in debtors' prison, and the youngster is receiving only an hour of school lessons during his dinner break at the warehouse. He feels helpless, abandoned. There may never be celebration, joy or hope again. ...*

This was no scene from the author's imagination. It was a period from his early life. Fortunately, Dickens's father had inherited some money, enabling him to pay off his debts and get out of prison—and his young son escaped a dreary fate.

Now the fear of being unable to pay his own debts haunted Dickens. Wearily, he started home from his long walk, no closer to an idea for the "cheerful, glowing" tale he wanted to tell than he'd been when he started out.

However, as he neared home, he felt the sudden flash of inspiration. What about a Christmas story! He would write one for the very people he passed on the black streets of London. People who lived and struggled with the same fears and longings he had known, people who hungered for a bit of cheer and hope.

But Christmas was less than three months away! How could he manage so great a task in so brief a time? The book would have to be short, certainly not a full novel. It would have to be finished by the end of November to be printed and

distributed in time for Christmas sales. For speed, he struck on the idea of adapting a Christmas-goblin story from a chapter in *The Pickwick Papers*.

He would fill the story with the scenes and characters his readers loved. There would be a small, sickly child; his honest but ineffectual father; and, at the center of the piece, a selfish villain, an old man with a pointed nose and shriveled cheeks.

As the mild days of October gave way to a cool November, the manuscript grew, page by page, and the story took life. The basic plot was simple enough for children to understand, but evoked themes that would conjure up warm memories and emotions in an adult's heart: *After retiring alone to his cold, barren apartment on Christmas Eve, Ebenezer Scrooge, a miserly London businessman, is visited by the spirit of his dead partner, Jacob Marley. Doomed by his greed and insensitivity to his fellow man when alive, Marley's ghost wanders the world in chains forged of his own indifference. He warns Scrooge that he must change, or suffer the same fate. The ghosts of Christmas Past, Christmas Present and Christmas Yet to Come appear and show Scrooge poignant scenes from his life and what will occur if he doesn't mend his ways. Filled with remorse, Scrooge renounces his former selfishness and becomes a kind, generous, loving person who has learned the true spirit of Christmas.*

Gradually, in the course of his writing, something surprising happened to Dickens. What had begun as a desperate, calculated plan to rescue himself from debt—"a little scheme," as he described it—soon began to work a change in the author. As he wrote about the kind of Christmas he loved—joyous family parties with clusters of mistletoe hanging from

the ceiling; cheerful carols, games, dances and gifts; delicious feasts of roast goose, plum pudding, fresh breads, all enjoyed in front of a blazing Yule log—the joy of the season he cherished began to alleviate his depression.

*A Christmas Carol* captured his heart and soul. It became a labor of love. Every time he dipped his quill pen into his ink, the characters seemed magically to take life: Tiny Tim with his crutches, Scrooge cowering in fear before the ghosts, Bob Cratchit drinking Christmas cheer in the face of poverty.

Each morning, Dickens grew excited and impatient to begin the day's work. "I was very much affected by the little book," he later wrote a newspaperman, and was "reluctant to lay it aside for a moment." A friend and Dickens's future biographer, John Forster, took note of the "strange mastery" the story held over the author. Dickens told a professor in America how, when writing, he "wept, and laughed, and wept again." Dickens even took charge of the design of the book, deciding on a gold-stamped cover, a red-and-green title page with colored endpapers, and four hand-colored etchings and four engraved woodcuts. To make the book affordable to the widest audience possible, he priced it at only five shillings.

At last, on December 2, he was finished, and the manuscript went to the printers. On December 17, the author's copies were delivered, and Dickens was delighted. He had never doubted that *A Christmas Carol* would be popular. But neither he nor his publishers were ready for the overwhelming response that came. The first edition of 6,000 copies sold out by Christmas Eve, and as the little book's heartwarming message spread, Dickens later recalled,

he received "by every post, all manner of strangers writing all manner of letters about their homes and hearths, and how the Carol is read aloud there, and kept on a very little shelf by itself." Novelist William Makepeace Thackeray said of the Carol: "It seems to me a national benefit, and to every man or woman who reads it a personal kindness."

Despite the book's public acclaim, it did not turn into the immediate financial success that Dickens had hoped for, because of the quality production he demanded and the low price he placed on the book. Nevertheless, he made enough money from it to scrape by, and *A Christmas Carol*'s enormous popularity revived his audience for subsequent novels, while giving a fresh, new direction to his life and career.

Although Dickens would write many other well-received and financially profitable books—*David Copperfield*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Great Expectations*—nothing would ever quite equal the soul-satisfying joy he derived from his universally loved little novel.

In a very real sense, Dickens popularized many aspects of the Christmas we celebrate today, including great family gatherings, seasonal drinks and dishes and gift giving. Even our language has been enriched by the tale. Who has not known a "Scrooge," or uttered "Bah! Humbug!" when feeling irritated or disbelieving. And the phrase "Merry Christmas!" gained wider usage after the story appeared.

In the midst of self-doubt and confusion, a man sometimes does his best work. From the storm of tribulation comes a gift. For Charles Dickens, a little Christmas novel brought newfound faith in himself and in the redemptive joy of the season.

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## Two Babes in a Manger

Author unknown

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In 1994, two Americans answered an invitation from the Russian Department of Education to teach morals and ethics (based on Biblical principles) in the public schools. They were invited to teach at prisons, businesses, the fire and police departments, and a large orphanage. About 100 boys and girls who had been abandoned, abused, and left in the care of a government-run program were in the orphanage. The Americans relate the following story:

It was nearing the holiday season, 1994, time for our orphans to hear the traditional story of Christmas for the first time. We told them about Mary and Joseph arriving in Bethlehem. Finding no room in the inn, the couple went to a stable, where the baby Jesus was born and placed in a manger.

Throughout the story, the children and orphanage staff sat and listened in amazement. Some sat on the edges of their stools, trying to grasp every word. Completing the story, we gave the children three small pieces of cardboard to make a crude manger. Each child was given a small paper square, cut from yellow napkins I had brought with me. No colored paper was available in the city. Following instructions, the children tore the paper and carefully laid strips in the manger for straw. Small squares of flannel, cut from a worn-out nightgown an American lady was throwing away as she left Russia, were used for the baby's blanket. A doll-like baby was cut from tan felt we had brought from the United States. The orphans were busy assembling their manger as I walked among them to see if they needed any help.

All went well until I got to one table where little Misha sat. He looked to be about six years old, and had finished his project. As I looked at

the little boy's manger, I was startled to see not one, but two babies in the manger.

Quickly, I called for the translator to ask the lad why there were two babies in the manger. Crossing his arms in front of him and looking at this completed manger scene, the child began to repeat the story very seriously. For such a young boy, who had only heard the Christmas story once, he related the happenings accurately—until he came to the part where Mary put the baby Jesus in the manger.

Then Misha started to ad lib. He made up his own ending to the story as he said, "And when Mary laid the baby in the manger, Jesus looked at me and asked me if I had a place to stay. I told Him I have no mama and I have no papa, so I don't have any place to stay. Then Jesus told me I could stay with Him. But I told Him I couldn't, because I didn't have a gift to give Him like everybody else did. But I wanted to stay with Jesus so much, so I thought about what I had that maybe I could use for a gift. I thought maybe that if I kept Him warm, that would be a good gift. So I asked Jesus, 'If I keep You warm, will that be a good enough gift?'

"And Jesus told me, 'If you keep Me warm, that will be the best gift anybody ever gave Me.'

"So I got into the manger, and then Jesus looked at me and He told me I could stay with Him—for always."

As little Misha finished his story, his eyes brimmed full of tears that splashed down his little cheeks. Putting his hand over his face, his head dropped to the table and his shoulders shook as he sobbed and sobbed. The little orphan had found Someone who would never abandon nor abuse him, Someone who would stay with him—for always.