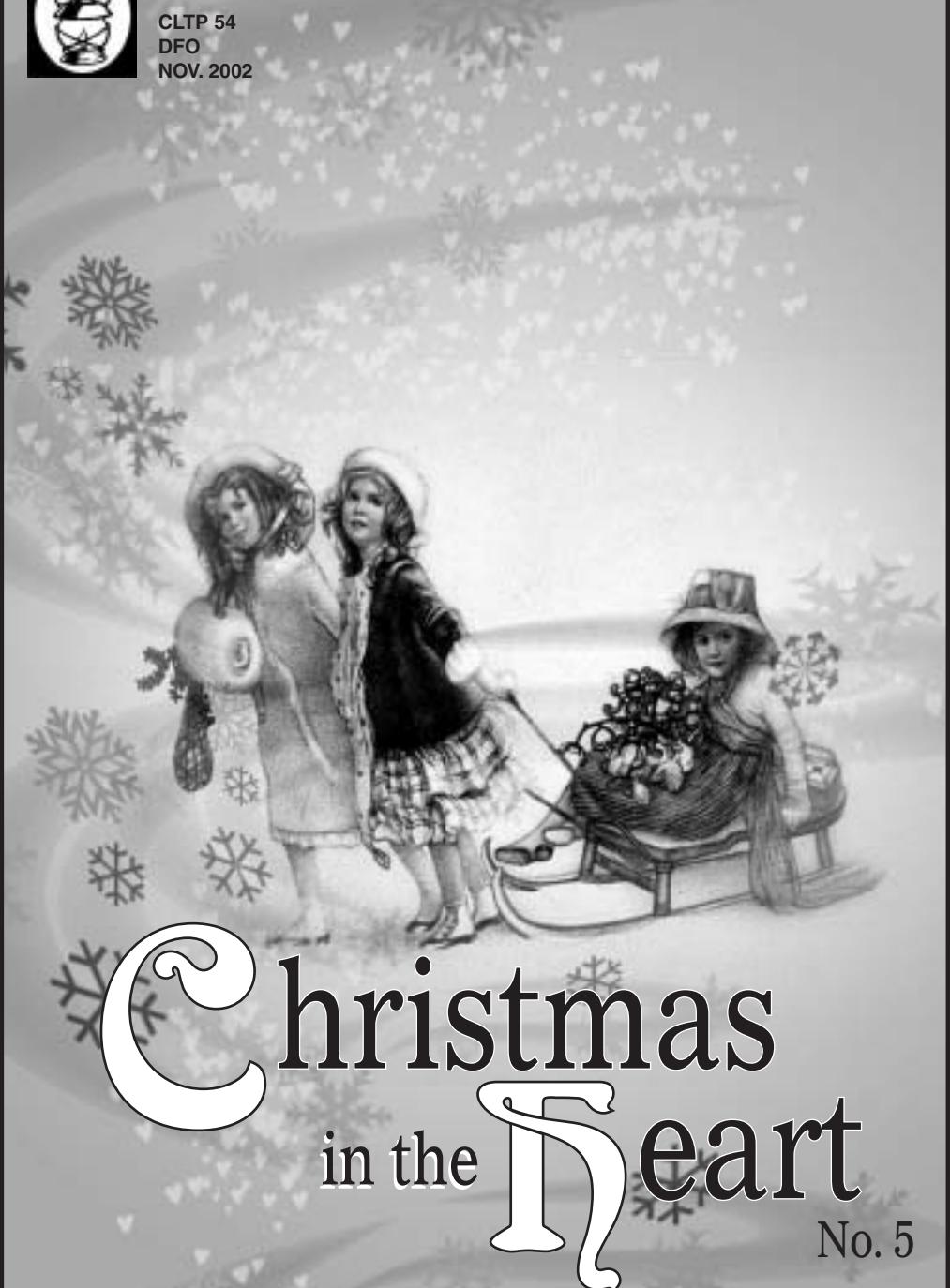




A Christian's Light for the Path

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# Christmas in the *Heart*

No. 5

# *The Hunger Winter*

*By Christina Rosmolen*

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**T**he week before Christmas in 1944, my mother sent my 14-year-old sister Maria and me out into the countryside of Holland to barter for food. My father had died before the war, and since I was 19, her eldest, she put me in charge of the expedition. "Be sure to be back before curfew," she warned, as she tucked my faded blue muffler around my neck.

My mother, two younger sisters, and I lived in the Netherlands' capital city, Amsterdam. The Nazi occupation of our country was in its fifth year. It was a time we would remember as "the hunger winter of '44." Hardships were at their worst. Our rations were barely enough to keep us alive. If we were lucky enough to find tulip bulbs being sold on the black market, we cooked them with cabbage and ate them.

Finally we ran out of provisions altogether. That was when my mother decided to exchange a pair of beautiful woolen blankets that we still owned for something to eat. Many people were traveling around the country, often on foot, trading their possessions for food with those farmers who had not yet reached the desperate situation of the city dwellers. "You must try to get potatoes, Christina," Mother told me.

"Or wheat, so I can bake bread."

So on a cold, dark December morning Maria and I set out on our old bicycles, their tires held together with patches. On my baggage carrier was strapped a canvas bag containing the two woolen blankets. We pedaled along, out of the city, each wrapped in her own thoughts. As usual, I was wondering what lay ahead of me. Here I was at the end of my teens, at the beginning of my grown-up life, and there were so many hard questions. Would the war ever end? What about the hunger I felt that had nothing to do with food? Since my childhood, an intensely lonely childhood, I had been yearning for a love and warmth that was all my own. And for something else which I had no name for.

My family didn't have any religious beliefs. From our earliest years, my sisters and I were told not to believe the fairy tales about "that Jewish carpenter." Religion was often mocked. In spite of what I was taught, even as a small girl, I wanted to believe in God, and that He lived in a faraway place called Heaven. I was afraid of being ridiculed, so I never mentioned my feelings to anyone. Instead, I struggled to find what was missing by reading. In books, I read about parents and children who loved to

(For 12 years and up. Selected stories may be read with younger children at parents' discretion.)

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pray and go to church, who worshipped a gentle, caring Jesus.

“Should we try there?” Maria interrupted my thoughts, pointing. We had arrived in farm country. We got off our bicycles, wheeled them up to the door of the farmhouse and knocked. It was the first of the many discouraging stops. Often no one answered. Sometimes a face would appear, but the door would quickly be slammed shut again. Farmers had become very wary of strangers knocking on their doors.

By 4:30 PM we had not found anyone willing to trade for food and the sky was darkening. We were 25 miles from Amsterdam. “It’s too late to make it home by eight-thirty curfew,” Maria said in a voice that was trying not to quiver.

“Right, we’ll have to find a place to stay overnight,” I said, with more confidence than I felt.

Looking down the road, we noticed a farmhouse surrounded by a white picket fence. A small gate opened to a path leading to the front door. Once more Maria and I got stiffly off our bikes. After some hesitation, I knocked. A round-faced, middle-aged woman opened the door and listened as I told her our unhappy story.

When I finished, she stepped back and gave us the first smile we had seen that day: “Come in, girls. Just leave your bicycles against that tree. My husband will take them to the barn.”

Gratefully we entered a bright kitchen warmed by a big old-fashioned black iron cook stove. A large oil lamp hung from the low, beamed ceiling, shedding light on a round wooden table. The room seemed full of people: an older gray-haired man, two younger ones, a young

woman holding a sleeping baby, and our hostess.

While explaining our situation to her family, she pulled up two chairs near the stove and motioned for us to sit down. The delicious aroma wafting from a big pot on the stove almost made me feel faint.

“Just warm yourselves,” said the woman with another smile. “We’ll eat as soon as Hank comes home.”

She had hardly finished speaking when the door opened and a broad-shouldered, dark-haired young man stepped into the kitchen. He didn’t seem at all surprised to find two strangers in the house.

The big bubbling pot was set in the middle of the table. Deep bowls were placed around it, along with a large hunk of bread. When everyone was seated, I watched as they folded their hands and closed their eyes. The father spoke to God with reverence and sincerity. I glanced from under my eyelashes at the young man called Hank, sitting next to me. His head was bowed and his eyes tightly closed. I quickly closed mine.

After the father said “Amen,” our bowls were filled with a thick stew, and a slice of dark brown bread was handed to us. It was a feast!

As soon as we had finished and cleared the table, the father opened a very large, worn book. In the quietness, he read aloud. I studied the faces around the table. Each person was listening, a glow in his eyes, a smile on his lips. Feeling content and a bit sleepy, I didn’t hear much of what was read, until one sentence caught my attention: “Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after

righteousness: for they shall be filled" (Matthew 5:6).

A thrill went through me. It was as if God were speaking directly to me through this good family. Not only had my physical hunger been satisfied, but also my spiritual hunger was being satisfied, too. These people believed in God. They prayed, they smiled, they were happy—clearly they cared about others. And they were real, not characters in a book.

Soon after the reading was over, Maria and I were shown our bed for the night. We slept upstairs on a straw mattress, under piles of old, clean-smelling blankets.

The next morning after breakfast we headed back to Amsterdam. From the family's own limited supplies we were given apples, potatoes, dried beans, wheat, and a loaf of homemade Christmas bread, a gift from the mother of the house to our mother.

Hank had checked the tires on our old bikes and seen to it that everything we were carrying was safely tied down. We pedaled home with light hearts. We were bringing food, and not only that;

we still had our blankets, because the family had refused any payment for their generosity.

In the days following, my mind was full of thoughts of the night when we two young strangers were sheltered, fed, and given the warmth of family faith and Christ-like love.

A few weeks later a member of that family, Hank, turned up for an unexpected visit at our house in Amsterdam. To my delight it seemed he couldn't forget me any more than I could forget him. When the war was over we were married, and a few years later we emigrated to the United States, where we settled down to raise our family according to God's Word.

Yes, it sounds like a fairy tale, like the "fairy tale" story of Jesus. But His reality was revealed to me when poor people shared their scanty provisions with those who were poorer still.

"I am the living bread," Jesus said (John 6:51). That hopeless Christmas of 1944 I learned that He lives in those who give Him to others through their deeds.

## *Rome—A Long Way from Home*

*By Joseph Caldwell*

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**I**t was almost noon and the bands in different parts of the great *piazza* were already playing, not necessarily the same tune, but vigorously and very much in the spirit of the day. Most of the enormous throng had already gathered and there was just enough

pushing and shoving to warm us up on a brisk December day in Rome. I was in St. Peter's Square and in a few moments Pope John Paul II would step out onto the balcony above the portico of the basilica and ask God's blessing on "the City and the World."

This is one of the great events of a true Roman Christmas, and even though I'm a Catholic, it was the "event" that had brought me there more than the wish for a blessing. My thoughts and feelings were elsewhere. I was in the Square mostly because that was the place to be.

I am a writer and for over a year I'd been in Rome under extremely fortunate circumstances. A novel I'd written had won the *Prix de Rome*, the Rome Prize, which meant a Fellowship at the American Academy in Rome. That in turn meant a place to live, a studio where I could write undisturbed, meals, a monthly stipend, and opportunities for travel—but now all that was about to end. *No. More than end. It was about to reverse itself.* I'd be returning to absolute uncertainty—no job, no money, no real prospects in sight. I did not want to leave.

And there was something else that weighed my spirit down that Christmas morning. This was 1980. On a Sunday night in late November of that year a powerful earthquake had struck the ancient hill towns above and to the east of Naples. Thousands were killed; hundreds of thousands were homeless, without food or medicine. Rain and snow and cold followed as if to mock the calamity with further hardship.

I'd been to some of these towns the previous October. I had seen the people suffering to work the rock-strewn soil; I had seen the ancient towns, the stones patiently, arduously, raised one on top of another to make a house, a church, a garden wall, a well. These were people who had endured much, and with a dignity that brought an almost serene beauty to their meanest labors.

Now I'd seen these towns, these people, again, on television, in the newspapers. I watched a man struggling along the rubble to retrieve a rake; a woman bending down into a heap of stones to pick up a cooking pot; a stunned family with three children sitting on the remains of a wall, too numbed to even weep. It seemed to me that these were people who'd had nothing more than their stones to begin with—and now these very stones had tumbled down around their heads, killing, destroying, undoing the patient work of centuries.

Some of us at the Academy wanted to go south, to do what we could to help, but we were told we'd only be more mouths to feed, more people to shelter. So we collected money and clothes, we gave blood. Some of us, I know, prayed. Some of us wept. But there was nothing more we could do except grieve.

Still, it was Christmas and I was in Rome. If I couldn't rejoice, I could at least put myself through the motions. Which is why I'd come to St. Peter's. And now it was noon. The great bell of the basilica was about to toll the hour. The crowd had grown, filling the entire *piazza*, the tension rising in expectation of the Pope's appearance.

I was toward the far end of the Square with the full throng in front of me—families with children, tourists, members of religious orders, and regular citizens of Rome. There were banners and placards of the homemade variety. There were teenagers and photographers perched on the base of the Egyptian obelisk that Caligula had brought to Rome. Ranks of police, uniformed in colors more consistent with Christmas than with their calling,

were stationed not far from the long incline of steps that led to the massive basilica itself. The spirit was one of cheerful exhilaration, but my petty concerns about my future and my deeper sorrow for others were all the more keenly felt because of the contrast between the crowd's mood and my own. I was sorry not to be open to the joy all around me, but there didn't seem to be much I could do about it.

Then the huge bell tolled, the doors to the balcony opened, and the Holy Father stepped forward, his hand raised in greeting. The crowd roared a Christmas greeting of its own, waving, holding high the banners and placards with messages to the Pontiff. The bands found new strength, strangers turned to each other, shouting, laughing, sharing the moment's joy. I did no more than lift a single hand and wave it with no more enthusiasm than if I were a child again in Wisconsin waving at a passing freight train.

It was then, however, that I noticed off to my left and a little in front of me, a family grouped around a boy of about eight. He was holding a sign on a pole, waving it with all his might, not an easy task considering the size of the boy and the size of the sign. The family—what seemed to be his parents, grandparents, and younger brother—was cheering not the Pope but the boy, urging him to raise the sign higher, to wave it more wildly. To say the least, the boy obliged.

This family was not Roman. Their faces were weatherworn; their clothes were rougher, ill fitting, of more durable stuff. Also, by their pride in the boy, in the sign, they seemed to have a solemnity even as they cheered. How fortunate they

were to be so filled with the Christmas spirit. I envied them.

The crowd finally quieted. In the silence, the Pope called out the words: "*Cristus natus est!*"—"Christ is born!" Again the crowd went wild, as if the great good news was being proclaimed for the first time in history, the sudden fulfillment of an old, enduring hope. Again the placards and the banners waved, the boy and his family more exultant than before. In his exuberance, the boy turned every which way, sharing his message with the entire throng.

I saw the sign. It was old and yellowed, the paint lacquered over to preserve it. Around its edges were leaves with birds that looked like chickens and roosters. The lettering was in a semi-script as if the painter had tried to duplicate medieval manuscripts and hadn't quite succeeded. The first letter of each word was gold, the others blue. My impression was that it was a revered family tradition to bring this particular sign to St. Peter's place each Christmas.

Then I read the words.

*"Buon Natale al Papa"*

*"La gente di Bavano"*

I knew of Bavano. It was a hill town to the south. It had been all but completely destroyed by the earthquake. These could have been the people I'd seen searching the ruins for a cooking pot or a rake; this could have been the stunned family on the broken wall.

The shouting of the crowd became a distant din; the waving, shoving throng an indistinct blur, as I found myself joining in and flinging out the words, Italian words, words that a few minutes before I had not felt like even uttering.

*"Buon Natale!"* I heard myself cry.

*“Buon Natale ... Buon Natale ...”* I was waving both arms, and my throat was getting raw. But I kept right on shouting.

These people had risen from their harsh sorrow to proclaim their joy. Nothing, they seemed to say, *nothing* cancels the coming of Christ; nothing mutes the glad tidings of the angels' song, neither petty concerns nor deepest sorrow.

*“Buon Natale!”* I called again—but added now another phrase. *“Buon Natale ... alla gente di Bavano”*—“Merry Christmas ... to the people of Bavano!”

Of course they couldn't hear me. But Christ could. Which is why, each Christmas since, and probably for all the Christmases in my life, I'll add to the more whispered moments of my celebration: *“...e Buon Natale alla gente di Bavano.”*

## *The Intruders*

*By Lu Miller*

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On a cold December evening in the last days of 1964, our Christmas tree still stood in all its beauty in front of the large picture window, its many lights twinkling into the night, letting all who passed know that Christmas had been celebrated and happiness was within.

About 8:30 in the evening, only a few minutes after I had gone into town to visit with friends, my husband Lloyd answered a knock at the door, greeted the man on the steps, and asked him in. We knew the man well, as he had worked for us on the farm on several occasions. I will call him Sam. Another young man, whom Sam said was his cousin, came inside also. I will call him Pete.

After the door closed, Sam took a pistol from under his coat, pointed it at my husband and demanded money. Pete had a gun also, a sawed-off shotgun.

My husband and these men talked for two hours while waiting for me to return. Their plan was for Sam to take Lloyd into town to get money from the hardware and furniture store, of which Lloyd was part owner and operator, and Pete was to stay with me as his hostage until their return. Lloyd kept telling them he had no money in the store and that we certainly didn't keep that kind of money in the house. He asked them to please not do anything they would regret, because for certain they would be caught sooner or later.

That was the situation that greeted me upon my return, at about 10:30 PM. By then they had decided to wait until the bank opened at nine the next day, then Sam and Lloyd would go to get the money and Pete and I would remain at home. Pete came immediately to my side with the sawed-off gun. He did not leave me. Wherever I went, he went—even to the

bathroom door. Sam did the same with Lloyd. I made a pot of coffee, hoping to calm my nerves and that, perhaps, we could talk to them. Sam just didn't seem to be the type for this sort of thing.

We did talk and talk for hours. I made pot after pot of coffee and the night wore on, but the men still wished for money, lots of money. Lloyd told them, over and over, that if they would leave and not hurt us we would not prosecute and not testify against them. They would not listen.

Sometime around 2:30 in the morning, I asked if we could take the Christmas decorations down. It would give us something to do, I thought, and time might pass faster.

"Yes," one of the men said, "as long as you don't do anything foolish."

Lloyd and Sam went outside to take lights from the house and shrubs. Pete settled down to help me with the tree, always with the gun. Neither man laid down his gun, at any time that I noticed.

I placed an empty cardboard box on the floor beside the Christmas tree, and then I went to my knees and started handing the ornaments, star, and other decorations to Pete, who placed them in the box. Pete was on one knee so he could reach the little figurines as I handed them to him. He used only one hand as the other held his gun. Then he shifted his gun to the other arm.

I reached for the figures in our little Nativity scene, the animals and the shepherds, and as I came to the little Baby Jesus lying in the manger, I held it in both of my hands. I held it a moment longer than I had the other figurines. I closed my eyes for a brief moment and

breathed a prayer that God be with us that night. I asked God that, as Pete took the little figure of Jesus in his hands, he would feel the love of God in a very special way. I prayed that God would bless Pete, that perhaps he didn't know what he was doing.

Ever so slowly, I handed the Baby Jesus to him, and as our hands touched, I held on for a second or two, reluctant to turn loose the figure in my hands, and hoping all the while that Pete would feel the peace and the power of Jesus as I did.

We continued taking the decorations down, inside and out. We consumed another pot of coffee, and this time I got out our leftover fruitcake. I didn't seem to be afraid anymore. We went on talking. Sam told us he needed the money because his family was hungry and his children had received very little for Christmas.

"Please, guys, go now, and we won't prosecute," I said. "You can walk out that door as free men."

We told them we would check their story and help them if it was true. As dawn was beginning to break, Sam and Pete began to whisper together more and more, as though they were trying to decide what to do. For the first time, Lloyd and I felt that our night of talking and pleading was beginning to get through to them. We sensed a difference in their feelings for us.

As light appeared over the hills, Sam said they were going to leave if we would keep our promise.

"Sam," Lloyd said, "you have known me for a long time and I believe you know I would never go back on a promise, especially such as this. Our word is good."

We watched them, guns hidden under their clothes now, walk down the sidewalk to their car. They talked a minute, and then Pete turned and came back to the house. We held our breath; perhaps Pete didn't trust us after all. He knocked at the door and Lloyd opened it again. Pete said he would like to replace the part he had taken away from the telephone when he arrived. We watched, as in a dream, as he quickly worked with the phone. He nodded to us slightly as he went out the door and said, "You can use your phone now."

*He does trust us, I thought. Thank You, God.*

They drove down the winding drive, and we watched them until they were out of sight. We looked at each other, knowing that the long night was finally over and we were alive.

Later in the day, we drove to Sam's small, unpainted house at the foot of the hill. We certainly hoped we would not see Sam or Pete. We found that Sam's mother and father lived in the house with him and his wife and three small children. Sam indeed had told us the truth. He needed help. We did not mention what had happened the night before. We told his parents we were just checking to see if they needed anything, as it was very cold.

That afternoon we went back to this little house with boxes of groceries, toys, even buckets of coal for the stove. We contacted members of our church for

clothing and food. And we kept our part of the bargain.

Two weeks later, we drove again to the unpainted little house to check on them and were told by neighbors that the family had moved. We never knew where they went.

That one night years ago stands out in my memory very vividly. I do believe it made me a better person. To think that this family lived less than five miles from us, and we didn't realize their problems. Since then Lloyd and I have tried to make ourselves more aware of other people and their needs.

I believe God was close to us that cold December night. I believe He heard my prayers and answered them. I also believe that as I touched the hand of Pete and handed him the little Baby Jesus, pausing with my hand ever so slightly over his rough hand, the Holy Spirit touched us in a very special way. Pete was tall, young, and rough looking, holding a gun, wanting something I was unable to give him; and I, though helpless and afraid, was able in some mysterious way to give him something more important than money.

Each Christmas, as I get out the box of Christmas decorations, I take great care to put the same Nativity scene under the tree just as it was that night long ago. A prayer is whispered, a prayer of thanksgiving for Lloyd's safety and mine, and a special prayer: I ask God to watch over Sam and Pete.

# *An Out-of-the-Blue Christmas*

*By Doris Crandall*

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*(Editor's note: A reprint from our first booklet of Christmas stories.)*

**I**t was Christmas Eve 1933. Mama was preparing to bake her "hard-times fruit cake," so called because the only similarity to fruit it contained was prunes. But it was, to our family, an extra-special cake. My sisters, Lottie, Vivian, Estelle, Dolly, and I sat around our kitchen table, shelling pecans for the cake.

None of us, except Mama, was enthusiastic, and I suspected her gaiety was partly put on. "Mama," I asked, "why can't Grandma and Aunt Ella, and Aunt Fran and Uncle Hugh, and all the cousins come for Christmas like last year? We won't even have any music unless Joe comes and brings his guitar."

We wouldn't mind not having a Christmas tree because we'd never had one, and Mama and Daddy had prepared us for the possibility of no presents, but the thought of no visitors or music really subdued us. Dolly, age five and the youngest, sobbed.

"Why'd we have to move, anyway?" she asked, sniffling. So Mama again explained her version of Dust-Bowl economics.

"When we had to give up our farm, we were lucky to find this place to rent, even if it is too far for the relatives to come.

Don't worry, though," Mama reassured us. "Why, God might send us company for Christmas right out of the blue, if we believe strong enough." She began to pit the boiled prunes and mash them.

As we worked, a wind came up and whistled through the newspaper we'd stuffed into the cracks in the corners. A cold gust blasted us as Daddy entered through the back door after doing the chores at the barn. "It looks like we're in for a blue norther," he said, rubbing his hands together.

Later, Daddy built up a roaring cowchip and mesquite fire in the potbellied stove in the living room, and we were about to get into our flannel nightgowns when someone knocked on the door. A traveler, wrapped in his bedroll, had missed the main road and stopped to ask for shelter from the storm for the night.

"Mind you," he said, when we had a cup of hot coffee, "I don't take charity. I work for my keep. I'm headed for California. Heard there's work to be had there."

Then Mama fixed our visitor a cozy pallet behind the stove. We girls went into our bedroom and crawled into the same bed for warmth. "Reckon he's the one Mama said God might send out of the blue for Jesus' birthday?" I whispered.

"He must be. Who else'd be out in weather like this?" Lottie said, and

Vivian and Estelle agreed. We snuggled, pondered, and slept.

At breakfast our guest sopped biscuits in gravy. "I never had a family that I remember," he said. "Can't recollect any name 'cept Gibson. You can call me Mr. Gibson if you want." He smiled, revealing gums without teeth. Seemingly, he had no possessions beyond his bedroll and the clothes he wore, but he pulled a large harmonica from his pants pocket and said, "I've always had this. Want me to play something?"

So Mr. Gibson spent Christmas Day with us, and what a delight he was! He helped with the work, told us stories and played all the beloved Christmas songs on his harmonica. He played by ear as we sang church hymns. After much pleading on our part, he agreed to stay one more night.

The next morning, when we awakened, Mr. Gibson was gone. I found

his harmonica on the kitchen table. "Oh, Mama," I cried, "Mr. Gibson forgot his harmonica—the only thing he had."

Mama looked thoughtful. "No," she said softly. She picked it up and ran her palm over the curlicues etched in the metal sides. "I think he left it on purpose."

"Oh, I see," I said, "sort of a Christmas present. And we didn't give him anything."

"Yes, we did, honey. We gave him a family for Christmas," she said, and smiled.

We never saw Mr. Gibson again. Daddy had an ear for music and quickly learned to play the harmonica. Through the years, it brought many a joyful memory of that unforgettable Christmas when God sent us Mr. Gibson right out of the blue—a blue norther, that is—because He knew how much a man with music, who longed for a family, and a family without music, who longed for company, needed each other.

## *The Dime-Store Angel*

*By Barbara Estelle Shepherd*

When our twin daughters were toddlers and Scotty was still a baby, my husband Dick and I dug into our meager Christmas fund to buy a dime-store angel for the top of our tree. Esthetically, she was no prize: The plastic wings were lopsided, the gaudy robes painted haphazardly, the reds splashing over into the blues and purples. At night, though, she underwent a mysterious change—

the light glowing from inside her robes softened the colors and her golden hair shone with the aura of a halo.

For six years she had the place of honor at the top of our tree. For six years, as in most families, Christmas was a time to be especially grateful for the wonderful gifts of God.

And then, in the seventh year, as summer enfolded us in her warm lethargy, I became aware of a new life

gently stirring beneath my heart. Of all God's gifts this seemed the culmination, for we had long prayed for another child. I came home from the doctor's office and plunged straight into plans for a mood-setting dinner.

That evening when Dick walked in, candles flickered on the table and the children took their places, self-conscious in Sunday clothes "when it's just Wednesday!"

"Uh-oh," he grinned, "Mother's up to something—one of those special dinners again." I smiled and waited till halfway through the meal to make the announcement. But I got no further than the first informative sentence.

"You mean we're gonna have a baby?" squealed Miriam. Milk overturned and chairs clattered. Doors slammed and Dick and I were alone with our happiness while our three small Paul Reveres galloped wildly through the neighborhood shouting their news to everyone within lung distance.

Summer and fall sped by as we turned the spare room into a nursery and scraped and repainted baby furniture. December came again; once more we were on the verge of Christmas. Then one morning, eight weeks too soon for our new nursery to be occupied, I was rushed to the hospital.

Shortly past noon our four-pound son was born. Still groggy from the anesthetic, I was wheeled—bed and all—to the nursery to view Kirk Steven through an incubator porthole. Dick silently squeezed my hand while we absorbed the doctor's account of the dangers Kirk would have to overcome in order to survive. As well as being premature, he urgently needed a complete blood

exchange to offset RH problems.

All that long afternoon Dick and I prayed desperately that our son's life be spared. It was evening when I awoke from an uneasy doze to find our minister standing by the bed. No word was spoken, but as he clasped my hand, I knew. Our little boy had lived less than 12 hours.

During the rest of that week in the hospital, grief and disbelief swept over me by turn. At last Dick came to take me home. He loaded my arms with a huge bouquet of red roses, but flowers can never fill arms that ache to hold a baby.

In the street outside I was astonished to see signs of Christmas everywhere: the decorated stores, the hurrying shoppers, the lights strung from every lamppost. I had forgotten the season. For the sake of the children at home, we agreed, we would go through the motions. But it would be no more than that.

And so a few days later Dick bought a tree and mechanically I joined him and the children in draping tinsel and hanging glass balls from the branches. Last of all, on the very top, went the forlorn dime-store angel. Then Dick flipped the switch and again she was beautiful. Scotty gazed upward for a moment, then said softly, "Daddy, this year we have a real angel, don't we? The one God gave us."

And Dick and I, in our poverty, were going to give Christmas to our children—forgetting that it is always we who receive it from them! For, of course, God was the reality in tragedy as He had been in our joys, the unchanging joy at the heart of all things. Scotty's words were for me like the light streaming now from the plastic angel, transforming what was poor and ugly on the surface into glory.

# *A Load of Coal*

*By H.N. Cook*

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On Christmas Eve 1948, the snow was coming down hard, blowing and swirling around my old two-ton dump truck as I drove across the West Virginia mountains. It had been snowing for hours and had accumulated eight to ten inches deep. My job at that time was delivering coal to the miners who lived in the coal camp. I had finished early and was looking forward to getting home.

As I neared the road that led to my home, my stepfather flagged me down. He told me about a mother with three children who lived about six miles up in the mountains. Her husband had died several months previously, leaving her and the children destitute. In the tradition of taking care of our own, the miners had assembled several boxes of food, clothing, and gifts that they wanted me to deliver, along with a load of coal, to the family.

Now believe me, I didn't want to go. Let's face it, I had worked hard all day, it was Christmas Eve, and I wanted to get home to my family. But that was just it—it was Christmas Eve, the time of giving and goodwill. With this thought in mind, I turned the truck around and drove back to the coal tipple, where I filled the truck. When I returned, I loaded the boxes in the front seat and in every nook and cranny I could find in the back. Then I set off.

Back in the hills of West Virginia, folks had built homes in some pretty out-of-the-way places. This woman's place was really out of the way. I had to travel on a road that had not been cleared by the highway department, and that had not had enough traffic to form a path. I drove up the valley as I had been directed, and turned off the road into a hollow called Lick Fork. The "road" was actually a snow-filled creek bed. When I saw that, I began to have doubts that I could make it. Nevertheless, I shifted into first gear and crept ahead.

When I came to the place a mile farther on where I was supposed to turn into the mountain to get to the woman's house, my heart dropped. There before me was a winding path that had been hand cut up the side of the mountain. I still could not see her house. I pulled the truck up to the path and got out. After looking the situation over, I decided there was no way I could get that two-ton dump truck up through that path.

*What am I to do?* I wondered. *Maybe I can just dump the coal and ask the family to come down for the food and clothes.* So I got out and walked up the path. It was near dusk, the temperature had dropped, and the blowing snow was beginning to drift.

The path was about six feet wide, overhung with snow-covered branches

and littered with stumps and limbs. Finally I reached the clearing where the house stood, a little shack with thin walls and cracks you could see through. I called the woman out of the house, explained why I was there, and asked if she had any way to carry the food and coal. She showed me a homemade wagon with wheelbarrow wheels.

Here I was in ten inches of snow, with a truck I had to empty before dark, an impassable path, and a wagon with wheelbarrow wheels. The only solution, as I could see it, was to turn the truck around, back it in as far as I could, dump the coal and set the boxes off.

As I returned to the truck, I kept asking, "Lord, what am I doing here?"

I started up the engine, turned my old truck around, and went into reverse. Foot by foot that old truck backed up along that mountain path. I kept telling myself, "I'll just keep going until I can't go any farther." However, the truck seemed to have a mind of its own. All at once, I was sitting there in the dark with my taillights

reflecting through the snow on that little shack. I was dumbfounded. That old truck had not slipped one inch or gotten stuck one time. And standing on the porch were four of the happiest people I had ever seen.

I unloaded the boxes and then dumped the coal, shoveling as much as I could under the sagging porch. As I worked, the thin, ill-clothed children dragged and pushed the boxes into the shack. When I had finished, the woman grasped my hand and thanked me over and over.

After the goodbyes, I got into the truck and started back. Darkness had overtaken me. However, upon reaching the "road," I stopped the truck and looked back at the path. "There is no way," I said to myself, "that I could have maneuvered this truck up that mountain, through all that snow, in the dark, without help from somewhere."

I had been raised to worship God. I believed in the birth of Christ. And that Christmas Eve, in the hills of West Virginia, I knew I had been an instrument of what Christmas is all about.

## *Blessings in Disguise*

*By Mildred Morris*

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**M**any years ago, when the 20<sup>th</sup> century and I were young, my father was pastor of a small Baptist Church in Eatonton, the central Georgia birthplace of Joel Chandler Harris, creator of the legendary "Uncle Remus." We loved the town and the

people, but Papa's salary of \$100 a month was stretched past the breaking point for our family. We would have found it even harder to get by if Papa's brother Robert hadn't always sent us a \$500 check on the first of December. In fact, all year we looked forward to that extra income.

A small part of that windfall was always allocated for each of us at Christmas, and for weeks we planned what we most wanted to buy with our share.

My seventh year is the one I remember best. Uncle Robert's letter arrived on schedule. In our usual ritual, Mama and we children gathered around Papa's chair in the kitchen as he opened the envelope. But this time all was not as usual. Papa caught his breath quickly, then read in a shaky voice: "Dear George, it seems such an impersonal thing to just mail you a check at Christmas, so I'm sending gifts this year which I hope you will all enjoy. Love, Robert."

Papa hid the dismay he must have been feeling. Mama couldn't help crying. Papa had a childlike faith in God to provide for his needs; oftener than not, God's provision was Mama. It was her worried-but-expert management that helped answer his prayers. Now even she was helpless.

The box with Uncle Robert's gifts arrived. We left it sealed and carried it into the parlor. For days we talked about what our gifts might be, and on Christmas morning we opened the box with unbridled hopes.

Alas, our hopes were quickly dashed! The handsome gifts all missed their mark. I was a tomboy and I craved a pair of bloomers—that daring garment introduced by the suffragettes. My gift was a doll. A sissy one. Pudgy young Rob, marbles champ of the fifth grade, got a telescope.

Papa had his heart set on new baptismal boots; his gift was a leisure jacket—and that was sad, because leisure was something he had less of than money.

Mom's gift was a shocker. She wanted one of the new electric motors for her sewing machine so she wouldn't have to power it with her foot. Her gift was a big, gleaming, elegant alligator handbag. Even I could see that she would look strange with a bag like the one the banker's wife carried to church.

When the last present had been opened we sat with the gifts in our laps and bright wrappings around us, too stunned to speak. Finally Papa rose to his feet.

"Fannie, children," he said gently, "I'm sure each of us feel that Uncle Robert hasn't understood our needs and wishes this Christmas, that he's disappointed us. But I'm afraid we are the ones who don't understand. As we all know, my brother is a bachelor. He's not as blessed as we are with Mother and with one another at Christmas each year. I'm sure he must feel lonely at such a time, but he's gone shopping for us this year, tried to imagine what he would want for Christmas if he were a merry ten-year-old like Grace or a middle-aged parson like me. He has given from the heart."

"If we find our gifts a little apart from our usual interests, we can also find that they open new doors." Leading the way, he slipped the brocaded jacket over his faded sweater. "My leisure coat will inspire me to take more time away from my busy schedule."

He suggested to us one by one how the gifts could bring a positive change to our lives. "Mildred's doll can lead her, we hope, to an interest in the domestic arts she'll need when her tree-climbing days are over. Rob's telescope can lift his eyes out of the playground sand for a look at the stars now and then."

And turning to Mama, "Fannie dear, I'm sure you'll find your magnificent bag a welcome touch of elegance in what I'm afraid is a pretty dreary wardrobe."

Each of us began to see our gifts and their giver with fresh vision. Love came into the room as an almost visible presence.

Mama began exploring the alligator bag and describing its wonders. "There's

a green suede lining and a little amber comb. Even a secret pocket with a snap!" She reached in a finger and drew out a bit of paper. It was crisp, folded and green. It was the \$500 check!

Papa's voice rose in rich cadence, firm as if he'd been fully expecting a miracle. "Praise God from whom all blessings flow!" And we all joined in.

It was the best of Christmases.

## *The Day Christmas Broke into Prison*

By Sgt. E. L. Allen

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**T**he six correctional officers under my command in the huge California prison stared at me as if I had lost my mind. I didn't blame them. But I needed their help to carry out the proposal I had just made. As the silence lengthened I breathed a short prayer. Then I waited ... and waited ... and waited.

For the past 11 years I have been an officer in a California "adjustment center," which is a police term for prison. My colleagues and I are responsible for 65 inmates in a prison population of over 1,400. Ours is a dangerous and thankless task. Of the 65 prisoners in our charge, 50 are known killers—that is, they have killed someone (some have several times) or else they had tried their best to do so.

When desperate men are caged, enormous amounts of emotional pressure builds up. For a few there may be hope, but for most there is nothing

but today and tomorrow, today and tomorrow, with nothing on the other side of tomorrow. Despite all the locks and bars, despite all the searches and precautions, inmates sometimes manage to fashion crude weapons: a knife from a strip of steel torn from a metal grille, a dagger from a piece of bedspring, or a screwdriver stolen from the woodworking shop. All too often they use them. One of my officers has been stabbed five times; another has been slashed twice.

If you are a Christian—and I try to be—you should put your faith to work wherever you find yourself. In a prison, this is not easy. When a prisoner goes berserk, you have to control him. When he attacks you, you have to defend yourself. I have had to do this on several occasions, and always the question comes into my mind: "What would Jesus do in a situation like this?" I am not sure I know the answer. Perhaps

He would love the man into submission. All I know is that when the episode has ended, I always go back to the prisoner and tell him I'm sorry it was necessary to use force. And every time the prisoner has said, in effect, "It's okay, Sarge. I know you had to do it."

One day last December while I was on duty, a thought flashed through my mind. I had been doing some research on inmates' backgrounds, talking to them, asking them questions. A depressingly high percentage never had visitors. They never received any mail. No one cared about them. "What would happen," I said to myself, "if we gave these men a Christmas party?"

I almost rejected the idea out of hand, because prison regulations prohibit grouping more than six of these people together at a time. But the idea refused to go away. The dayroom off the tiers of cells would hold about 25 people. What if we divided our inmates into three groups of about 22 men and let them into the dayroom one group at a time?

But that way, they would still outnumber the guards more than three to one. Would they try to take advantage of such a situation if I did manage to get the rules suspended? What would happen to my job if they did? Who would pay for such a party anyway? The whole thing was preposterous.

But still the idea would not go away. When I proposed it to my superiors, they gave me a reluctant green light. Now I was proposing it to my own officers. I explained that I had official permission. "If you want no part of this," I said, "I won't blame you. But here's how I feel. For three hundred and sixty-four days

out of the year we control and dominate these men. On this one day I would like to serve them a good meal, give them a gift, offer them a kind word as fellow human beings. To do this, I need your cooperation. Not only that, I need you to help me pay for the party. Will you do it?"

The silence seemed to go on forever, thick and heavy and long. Finally the officer who had been stabbed five times cleared his throat. "Well," he said, "maybe I could form a singing group. Some of these guys are pretty good with a guitar."

Another officer looked dubiously around him. "Do you think we could decorate this place?"

"Sure," said a third.

"I'll bet we could even dream up a Christmas tree!" said a fourth. "We'd have to get it from outside."

I felt my throat go tight as the voices went on and on, each man offering his time and his money and his help.

During the week that followed, an enthusiasm was generated between officers and inmates that had never existed before. Black, white, and Mexican singing groups were formed. The officers decorated the dayroom with sheets on which they had lettered "Merry Christmas" and "Happy New Year." Somebody made a marvelous Christmas tree out of a mop and streamers of green paper. We improvised a stage.

At one point, I learned later, a rough prisoner let it be known that he was planning to disrupt the party if he were let out of his cell. Shortly a delegation of four other prisoners called on him. If he caused any trouble, they told

him, there would be a great deal more trouble—for him.

“What’s the matter with you guys?” snarled the prisoner. “We’re all cons, ain’t we?”

“You’re a con,” the leader of the group told him scornfully. “The rest of us just happen to be here!”

When news of what we were planning filtered into other sections of the prison, some people thought I was losing my mind. Our supervisors allowed plans to proceed on condition that tear gas was available outside the unit. However, we all agreed that when the big day arrived, all tear gas and guns and handcuffs would be left in the security room. I was sure this was the right decision. Even so, I didn’t sleep too well on Christmas Eve. I kept wondering where an ex-grocer with 11 years of custody experience would find another job.

On Christmas Day, instead of “keying” each inmate out separately and locking the cell door behind him, we let 22 men out at a time and didn’t lock the doors. They came out warily, almost as if they were afraid it was some kind of trick or trap.

As each one came into the dayroom, a guard handed him a tray of food completely different from drab prison fare: cold cuts, ham, salad, cakes and cookies, punch. (We ran over our food budget, but the caterer absorbed the loss.) Each inmate was given a gift. The men in the upper tier each got a gift-wrapped T-shirt, the men on the lower tier got socks.

At first there was some constraint; it was so strange and different for all of us. But then the first singing group sang “Silent Night,” and we all joined in. Then they sang more carols and some popular songs, and soon everyone was talking to everyone.

Only once did I feel a twinge of real apprehension. That was when I saw an inmate considered to be extremely dangerous slowly approaching an officer he had stabbed only a few weeks earlier. Quickly I moved to a position that would allow me to aid the officer if he were attacked, but to my amazement I heard the inmate say to him, “I never received a Christmas gift from anyone before in my whole life. I can’t repay you, but if you can find it in your heart to forgive me, I will never again take up a weapon against you or anyone else.”

Finally the long day was over, but the singing continued late into the night and all my men stayed overtime. God had answered my prayers: We didn’t have a single incident of any kind.

As I was preparing to leave for home, I was handed a note signed by 65 “hardcore” prisoners. Sure it was in crude handwriting and there were misspellings, but it said:

“We know you had gas outside, but you did not need it. Some of us prayed, and you had God as a correctional officer. Have a good Christmas.”

Still inmates, yes. Still prisoners, yes. But men who now, because of Christ’s birthday, had something to hope for—on the other side of tomorrow.

# *Emergency Landing*

*By Marius Lodeesen*

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**C**hristmas Eve, 1957. Peace on Earth, good will to men. For most, a celebration, a family feast, a time for prayer and devotion. For me, that was the Christmas that became a revelation, and I can almost say, a resurrection.

I was the captain of a Pan Am Clipper, "Sovereign of the Seas," Flight Number One outbound from Calcutta, India, inbound to Karachi, Pakistan. With 75 passengers aboard, we sped across endless plains, ducked under summits of towering cumulus clouds. Nearing the Indus River, the Clipper plunged into ragged thunderheads, buffeted by fierce drafts. Nothing exciting. My trusty Douglas DC-6, a four-engine, propeller-driven aircraft, was fully able to cope with these conditions and so was I. In fact, I rather enjoyed it.

Like many of my colleagues, I am a religious man. Not necessarily in the conventional sense, but I have faith in the Supreme Being guarding our lives, though not always in ways understandable to us. Faith I would need during the following dreadful hours, faith in myself and even more in the force of God. I think of a colleague [Col. Robert L. Scott] who wrote a book titled, *God Is My Co-Pilot*. God was not my co-pilot on that final approach. He was in command.

That afternoon, as we approached Karachi, a freak tropical storm had dumped thousands of tons of water on the desert. Karachi controllers, slow even in good weather, kept us circling for quite a while, but finally clearance to land came through. Down we came. I saw the approach lights looking fuzzy through the rain-streaked windshield. All checks were completed. Suddenly the agitated voice of the tower controller came through: "Clipper One! Don't land. The runway is flooded. Don't land! Overshoot and return to beacon. Right turn—hold fifteen hundred feet!"

"Nuts!" I growled, shoving the four throttles forward. We thundered back into the overcast.

I told the tower we would take up a holding pattern. Then I switched to company frequency and asked our Pan Am dispatcher what the trouble was.

"I'm sitting on my desk, Captain," he said. "There's a regular river flowing through the office. A levee has broken somewhere and the field is flooded. You'll have to divert to Bombay. How much fuel do you have left?"

"Not a lot," I told him. "We left Calcutta with minimum fuel. Stand by." I turned to Nick, our flight engineer. "What's the fuel situation, Nicky?"

He gave me a look. "I wouldn't count on it making it to Bombay," he said.

That was the start of an ordeal that still makes me cold when I recall it. I called the dispatcher again. No answer. Nervously I switched over to the tower frequency. Sinister silence.

"Power failure," said Jim, my first officer, laconically. "With all that water on the field, I've been expecting it."

Chills began running up and down my spine. Bombay? Too far. Karachi? Field flooded; no communication. Nagging questions came to mind: *Why didn't you take on more fuel at Calcutta? Why did you wait over Karachi until your fuel became dangerously low? Why?*

With an effort I pulled myself together. "We'll go to Nawabshah, Jim."

He stared at me. "Nawabshah? Are you crazy?" Nawabshah was a desert airstrip some 125 miles northeast of Karachi. It was operated—sometimes—by the Pakistan Air Force as a training field.

"We have no choice," I told Jim. Just then Kathy, our flight attendant, entered the cockpit, "We're in trouble, Kathy," I said. "Keep everybody calm if you can."

The plane shot up like a rocket; with little fuel we were very light. At 9,000 feet the clouds began to thin and we broke out. The stars looked strangely remote, shining through a thin veil of gauze cirrus high in the troposphere, and I thought of all the millions of people who were thinking and singing and dreaming about the Star of Bethlehem. I thought about them and envied them.

Jim cleared his throat. "What if the field's not operational?"

I did not answer him. He knew as well as I did that if Nawabshah wasn't operational it meant a crash landing in

the desert at night. Maybe with a few survivors. Or maybe not.

I rummaged in my briefcase for the route manual. Nawabshah wasn't much even as an emergency field. The runway was short and made of bricks. The field did have runway lights and a low powered beacon not aligned with the runway. I tuned in the frequency of the beacon and with infinite relief saw the needles of the RMI (Radio Magnetic Indicator) come alive and, after hunting briefly, point ahead. "How's the fuel, Nicky?"

"I've got 'em leaned out pretty near to starving," the engineer said. "We'll get there, but not much more."

I clipped the Nawabshah page of the route manual to my control wheel. I knew we must be prepared to descend on the runway heading. Minimum official descent altitude was 1,000 feet, meaning that we were not supposed to go below that unless we had the runway in view. On a night like this, a visual contact at 1,000 feet was far from likely.

I called Nawabshah tower. The answer came in an accented voice that I could barely understand. The field was in operation, he said, but visibility was critical. The ceiling was right down on deck.

We prepared the plane for approach; we had no alternative. "Relax!" I muttered to myself. "Don't freeze now." But to relax under conditions of total concentration is dreadfully difficult.

"Gear down! Flap thirty!"

A rumbling told me the clamshells underneath the wings had opened and that the landing gear was in extension. Now: a turn to the right to the runway heading. Depress the nose. Reduce

power. Steady on the runway heading. Pick up that wing! Steady the descent! Five degrees over the heading—kick her back. I felt an overpowering urge to look up, but knew that then the transition back to the instruments would be difficult.

“Runway in sight,” said Jim suddenly. “To my right!”

I looked up. Total blackness. Quickly I turned my eyes to the gauges again.

“Overshoot!” came Jim’s command.

I eased the throttles ahead. Without waiting for my order, Jim had upped the wheels; I felt the vibration stop when they tucked in. Straight ahead I climbed until we were back at 1,000 feet. I ran my tongue over parched lips. “We’ll never make it this way, fellows. We just have to throw away the book and go on in.”

I knew what my mates were up against. It was especially hard on Jim. In normal airline flying, co-pilots often sweat out low approaches but then there are minimum safe altitudes below which the pilot is not allowed to go. I knew how nerve-racking it was for Jim and Nick to see me go down into the blackness while they sat powerless, expecting any moment to crash.

Now the tower advised that we had flown very low over the runway. He had seen our lights. Visibility was changing constantly as low scud passed over the field.

“Jim, ask the tower what the terrain is like on the upwind end of the runway. If we land long and run off, what kind of ground can we expect?”

Jim turned to me after a few moments. “He says, don’t do that. The ground just drops away.”

I blotted my forehead with my sleeve. Jim coached me in his soft, steady voice.

“You’re right on—good, steady now—a hair to the left—right on...”

Sweat poured down my neck. I glanced at the clock. We had been messing around for almost half an hour. How much longer? I felt the wheels go down again, then the flaps. I tried to make the turn a little tighter, keeping a sink rate of 350 feet per minute. The altimeter crept through 200 feet above terrain. Nothing. One hundred fifty feet...

“Runway in sight! Dead ahead!” I looked up. A pinpoint cone of light reared up before me, the common optical illusion when eyes focused on instruments suddenly perceive at close range two strings of converging runway lights against a pitch-black background. But we were over the middle of the field; we couldn’t possibly make it. I eased up.

“How much fuel, Nick?” I asked limply.

“Possible two approaches. Better make it one.”

Yes, better make it one. Running out of fuel during the approach would be fatal. Better to put her down on the next attempt somewhere, anywhere.

I rubbed the moist palms of my hands on my trouser legs. I pushed the galley button. When Kathy came forward I said, “We’re going in this time, Kathy. It could be belly landing. Sit at the aft hatch. Nick will take the forward hatch. No escape chutes; they would only block the exits with the wheels up. And Kathy ... say a prayer, will you?”

She put a hand on my arm. “Yes, Lodi,” she said. She had never called me that before—always, “Captain Lodi.”

In three minutes we would be over the beach, inbound. I tried not to think

of myself. I tried not to think of the passengers. I tried not to think that in less than five minutes we might all be dead.

A slight hesitation of the RMI needles. Then one swept to the left, the other to the right. We were exactly over the beacon. Wheels rumbled down. If we had to make a belly landing, Jim would retract them at the last moment.

Then I did something that I had never done before and would never do again. I disregarded the altimeter. If I had obeyed it I would have pulled back the control wheel at the very moment it was imperative to keep going down. Something seemed to be telling me, "It's all right. Never mind the altimeter. Go on down, go on down." Hands gripping the wheel, feet pushing the rudder pedals, mind almost black. Obeying the Power that was guiding me. Down into the darkness. Down, down.

Jim's ice-cold voice: "Runway in sight! Put her down!"

There was the ladder of lights. This time not so steep. Very close. A hand reached over my shoulder and flipped on the landing beams. A cone of light stabbed ahead and turned that ladder into a runway. The wheels reached for the earth like the feet of an exhausted bird after a long migratory flight. I pulled the throttle levers into reverse thrust. Against a cushion of air we slowed down. The end of the runway loomed ahead. I hit the brakes, hard. We shuddered to a stop six feet from the barrier.

I spent the rest of Christmas Eve night in a wicker chair on the porch

of the clapboard structure that was Nawabshah's air terminal. Some of my passengers were a bit disgruntled, but they were all alive. I felt calm and happy—and thankful.

Near dawn I walked from the porch to the edge of the field. When daylight came, we would refuel and move on.

I sat down under a wing of the plane, leaning my back against a wheel, and listening to the sounds of the desert. Clouds were dispersing, stars winked above the fading overcast. The heavens began to glow with countless stars, and the night, full of eternity and joy, found a voice telling the ancient story of Bethlehem. Never again would I feel so profoundly yet so simply how eons and years flow together in one eternal moment. I drew from my pocket a piece of a paper that Kathy had given me the previous evening. Kathy was always talking to me about religion, and passing nuggets from the Bible. It was a verse from the book of Daniel (6: 27): "He delivereth and rescueth, and He worketh signs and wonders in Heaven and in Earth. . . ."

Deliverance and rescue? Yes. Signs in the earth?

An unfamiliar sound seemed to come from behind a shallow rise in the ground. A soft bleating, as if from a herd of sheep or goats. I stared, and as I stared, out of the grayness three shepherds came. Leaning on tall staffs, they regarded the airplane silently, their silhouettes dark against the dawn of Christmas Day.

# *Gold, Common Sense, and Fur*

*By Linda C. Stafford*

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**M**y husband and I had been happily (most of the time) married for five years, but hadn't been blessed with a baby. I decided to do some serious praying and promised God that if He would give us a child, I would be a perfect mother, love it with all my heart, and raise it with His Word as my guide.

God answered my prayers and blessed us with a son. The next year God blessed us with another son. The following year, He blessed us with yet another son. The year after that we were blessed with a daughter.

My husband thought we'd been blessed right into poverty. We now had four children, and the oldest was only four years old.

I learned never to ask God for anything unless I meant it. As a minister once told me, "If you pray for rain, make sure you carry an umbrella."

I began reading a few verses from the Bible to the children each day as they lay in their cribs. I was off to a good start. God had entrusted me with four children and I didn't want to disappoint Him.

I tried to be patient the day the children smashed two dozen eggs on the kitchen floor searching for baby chicks. I tried to be understanding when

they started a hotel for homeless frogs in the spare bedroom, although it took me nearly two hours to catch all twenty-three frogs.

When my daughter poured ketchup all over herself and rolled up in a blanket to see how it felt to be a hot dog, I tried to see the humor rather than the mess.

In spite of changing over twenty-five thousand diapers, never eating a hot meal, and never sleeping for more than thirty minutes at a time, I still thank God daily for my children.

While I couldn't keep my promise to be a perfect mother—I didn't even come close—I did keep my promise to raise them in the Word of God.

I knew I was missing the mark just a little when I told my daughter we were going to church to worship God, and she wanted to bring a bar of soap along to "wash up" Jesus, too.

Something was lost in the translation when I explained that God gave us everlasting life, and my son thought it was generous of God to give us His "last wife."

My proudest moment came during the children's Christmas pageant. My daughter was playing Mary, two of my sons were shepherds, and my youngest son was a wise man. This was their moment to shine.

My five-year-old shepherd had practiced his line, "We found the Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes." But he was nervous and said, "The baby was wrapped in wrinkled clothes."

My four-year-old "Mary" said, "That's not 'wrinkled clothes,' silly. That's dirty, rotten clothes."

A wrestling match broke out between Mary and the shepherd and was stopped by an angel, who bent her halo and lost her left wing.

I slouched a little lower in my seat when Mary dropped the doll representing Baby Jesus, and it bounced down the aisle crying, "Mama-mama." Mary grabbed the doll, wrapped it back up and held it tightly as the wise men arrived.

My other son stepped forward wearing a bathrobe and a paper crown, knelt at the manger and announced, "We are the three wise men, and we are bringing gifts of gold, common sense, and fur."

The congregation dissolved into laughter, and the pageant got a standing ovation.

"I've never enjoyed a Christmas program as much as this one," Father Brian laughed, wiping tears from his eyes. "For the rest of my life, I'll never hear the Christmas story without thinking of gold, common sense, and fur."

"My children are my pride and my joy and my greatest blessing," I said, as I dug through my purse for an aspirin.

