



A Christian's Light for the Path

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# Christmas in the Heart

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## *Trouble at Wallen's Creek*

*By Betty Banner*

**I**t was the first of December in the 1930s. The Great Depression was in full swing and my husband and I were living in the mountains of Virginia. While there was plenty of good food—homegrown and home-preserved—on the table, there was no cash available. Now it is hard to believe that we had to rob the hens' nests when we needed a little coffee or sugar, then walk to the little country store to trade the eggs for those items. But that's the way it was.

Every Sunday afternoon I walked over a mile to a little wood-frame Methodist church up the valley, where a few of the older folks were trying to have Sunday school for the children and singing for the adults. There was no preacher, no literature, and the only study class was taught from the Bible alone.

Old Man John led the singing. Each Sunday he brought a few ragged songbooks along with his tuning fork. He would select an old hymn, give the fork a ringing blow on the back of a bench and then "raise the

tune." I have never heard more enthusiastic singing in any church.

The first Sunday in December I was thinking of the coming Christmas season, which had always meant so much to me. At church, before the singing started, I asked the group who crowded around the one wood-burning stove for warmth, "Aren't we going to have a Christmas tree for the children and some kind of program?"

I got amazed stares from everyone. Finally John said, "You aimin' to bring a tree into the church house? We ain't never done that!"

To justify my proposal I began to tell of the trees we had in town churches and the programs where the children recited their pieces. I did a pretty good job, I guess, for the young folks started to back me up and beg for such a "doin's."

Then a mother asked, "What'd we put on a tree? And we ain't got no money for a treat for the kids."

A little boy piped up, "We're making things for our tree at school [a little one-

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room building in the valley] and teacher's gonna let us take 'em home after school, an' we could bring 'em here for this tree."

I said that I had some ornaments from my home to bring. Then another woman spoke up. "We got no treat and all the kids would come lookin' for one. Teacher always gives 'em a little poke of candy, but we got no money for candy."

My feathers really fell then, and I was ready to call it off when another mother spoke up. "We can have a treat! We all raised popcorn, and I used to make mighty good popcorn balls if I do say so myself. I could make 'em again if you'll all help me and fetch some popcorn and molasses."

There it was, we had a treat, and so our plans went forward. The men (there were only four who came to church) promised to cut the tree on Saturday before Christmas and we could decorate it then.

As the days passed, no problems arose. All went as planned, and Saturday afternoon we gathered to trim the tree. The children had even drawn names, which meant some little homemade gift would be under the tree for each one. We had no lights, for electricity had not as yet come to the mountains. But when we finished we all were proud of the way our tree looked and were full of Christmas anticipation.

Sunday came cloudy and cold with light snow flurries. I was so excited I could hardly wait to get started to church. This was my idea, my program. I was bringing the first Christmas tree to that little church. I was so busy patting myself on the back for such a noble deed, however, that I forgot the real meaning and purpose of Christmas.

The mountain folk gathered in early. Little crudely wrapped packages went under the tree and the children just stood around and admired it, pointing out the ornaments they had made from colored paper. The treat arrived in a wagon—two

great boxes with brown paper covering the contents—and was carried up to the platform behind the tree. We had to keep shooing the children away to keep the treat a surprise.

At last the program got under way. I was almost bursting with pride (in myself, I'm afraid) as the children said their pieces and sang the carols they had learned. I stood near the tree to call out each child's name as his or her time came. It was in the middle of the program that Gus and Lem came stamping in.

I felt my heart lurch when I saw those two big mountain men, rough as grizzly bears. I knew they had a moonshine still back in the hills and that more often than not they were full of their own "white lightning." I knew, too, that they took a perverse delight in bursting into gatherings where they were neither invited nor wanted, and where they frightened and bullied people. Just the day before, Old John had been talking about them. "You know them two fellers that got that moonshine still up in the holler, Gus and Lem? Don't you know they went plumb over to Black Lick last month when those folks tried to have an ice cream supper at the school, and they come in drunk, and they busted up the whole doin's!"

In they came now, stamping their feet, acting like the snow outside was a foot deep instead of just a couple of inches. They didn't take off their caps, but pushed across a group of young folks sitting on the back bench with much noise and nudging and laughing. My heart sank into my shoes and I saw Old John give me a frightened look.

I called on the next child and all was fairly quiet as she stumbled through her little verse. When she sat down, however, the noise in the back row started again, this time much louder, and the scuffling

got rowdy with a few oaths audible to the congregation. I knew the men had been sampling their own moonshine and I was sick with fright at what might be coming next. It was time for the treat to be passed out, but the disturbance was growing by leaps and bounds, the two men pawing and pulling at the girls near them and pestering them with their rude attentions.

The situation was almost out of hand and growing worse. For the first time that afternoon I forgot about myself and my smug self-satisfaction and turned to God for help. I felt like inside I was wringing my hands, and I began saying, "What am I going to do? Please, God, help me!"

Then I heard a Voice within me as clearly as if it had been spoken by the woman next to me. *Ask them to help you.*

Like Peter of old, I bucked God immediately. "Ask those drunks, Lord?" But again it came, *Ask them.* This time I did not hesitate, but walked back to the men, who were startled enough to stop their aggressive behavior.

"Fellows, we've got a treat for the kids, but the boxes are heavy and we want to make sure it goes around. Would you help me pass it out?"

They looked as if they doubted their ears, then stared at each other when I asked again. They were so taken aback they didn't

know how to refuse, and meekly followed me up to the boxes of popcorn balls.

From that minute I never doubted that God had actually spoken to me, for although both men reeked of whiskey, they passed out those big candy balls, grinning from ear to ear as they went through the crowd, seeing that not only was no one slighted, but also that little grabbers were told in no uncertain terms they could only have one popcorn ball.

When they got back to me, I thanked them and insisted they have a candy ball themselves. They shuffled and squirmed, but finally took them and munched through the confection with as much gusto as the children. All was peaceful until the last morsel was eaten, and if molasses and popcorn make for sticky fingers and faces, they also made for much happiness.

When Old John led us in our closing prayer I had to peek, and to my delight, I saw the two men remove their caps and stand still, even if they didn't bow their heads.

As we all departed from the church, it was a humble person who walked home through the snowflakes, for I knew that this Christmas would long be remembered in the valley, and it was all God's doing. My words of thanksgiving came out in a whisper: "Happy birthday, dear Savior. Happy birthday."

## *An Elf's Tale*

*By Tyree Dillingham*

**I**t was six o'clock at the mall, and I was as exhausted as an elf on Christmas Eve. In fact, I was an elf and it was Christmas Eve. That December of my sixteenth year, 1995, I'd been working two jobs to help my parents

with my school tuition and to make a little extra holiday money. My second job was as an elf for Santa to help with kids' photos. Between my two jobs, I'd worked twelve hours straight the day before; on Christmas

Eve, things were so busy at Santaland that I hadn't even had a coffee break all day.

But this was it—only minutes more, and I'd have survived! I looked over at Shelly, our manager, and she gave me an encouraging smile. She was the reason I'd made it through. She'd been thrown in as manager halfway through the season, and she'd made all the difference in the world.

My job had changed from stress-filled to challenging. Instead of yelling at her workers to keep us in line, she encouraged us and stood behind us. She made us pull together as a team. Especially when things were their craziest, she always had a smile and an encouraging word. Under her leadership, we'd achieved the highest number of mall photo sales in California.

I knew it was a difficult holiday season for her—she'd recently suffered a miscarriage. I hoped she knew how great she was and what a difference she'd made to all her workers, and to all the little children who'd come to have their pictures taken. Our booth was open until seven; at six things started to slow down and I finally took a break.

Although I didn't have much money, I really wanted to buy a little gift for Shelly so that she'd know we appreciated her. I got to a store that sold soap and lotion just as they put the grate down. "Sorry, we're closed!" barked the clerk, who looked as tired as I was and didn't sound sorry at all.

I looked around and, to my dismay, found that all the stores had closed. I'd been so tired I hadn't noticed. I was really bummed. I had been working all day and had missed buying her a present by one minute. On my way back to the Santa booth, I saw that Nordstrom was still open. Fearful that they, too, would close at any moment, I hurried inside and followed the signs toward the Gift Gallery.

As I rushed through the store, I began to

feel very conspicuous. It seemed the other shoppers were all very well dressed and wealthy, and here I was, a broke teenager in an elf costume. How could I even think I'd find something in such a posh store for under fifteen dollars?

I self-consciously jingled my way into the Gift Gallery. A woman sales associate, who also looked as if she'd just stepped off a fashion runway, came over and asked if she could help me. As she did, everyone in the department turned and stared. As quietly as possible, I said, "No, that's okay. Just help somebody else."

She looked right at me and smiled. "No," she said. "I want to help you." I told the woman who I was buying for and why, then I sheepishly admitted I only had fifteen dollars to spend. She looked as pleased and thoughtful as if I'd just asked to spend \$1,500.

By now, the department had emptied, but she carefully went around, selecting a few things that would make a nice basket. The total came to \$14.09.

The store was closing; as she rang up the purchase, the lights were turned off. I was thinking that if I could take them home and wrap them, I could make them really pretty but I didn't have time. As if reading my mind, the saleslady asked, "Do you need this wrapped?"

"Yes," I said. By now the store was closed. Over the intercom, a voice asked if there were still customers in the store. I knew this woman was probably as eager to get home on Christmas Eve as everybody else, and here she was stuck waiting on some kid with a measly purchase. But she was gone in the back room a long time.

When she returned, she brought out the most beautiful basket I'd ever seen. It was all wrapped up in silver and gold, and looked as if I'd spent fifty dollars on

it, at least. I couldn't believe it. I was so happy! When I thanked her, she said, "You elves are out in the mall spreading joy to so many people, I just wanted to bring a little joy to you."

"Merry Christmas, Shelly," I said back at the booth. My manager gasped when she saw the present; she was so touched and happy that she started crying. I hoped it gave a happy start to her Christmas.

All through the holidays I couldn't stop thinking about the kindness and effort of the saleswoman, and how much joy she had brought to me, and in turn to my manager. I thought the least I could do was to write a letter to the store and let them know about it. About a week later, I got a reply from the store, thanking me for writing.

I thought that was the end of it, until mid January. That's when I got a call from Stephanie, the sales associate. She wanted to take me to lunch. Me, a fifteen-dollar, sixteen-year-old customer.

When we met, Stephanie gave me a hug, and a present, and told me this story. She had walked into a recent employee meeting to find herself on the list of nominees to be named the Nordstrom All-Star. She was confused but excited, as she had never before been nominated. At the point in the meeting when the winner was announced, they called Stephanie—she'd won! When she went up front to accept the award, her manager read my letter out loud. Everyone gave her a huge round of applause.

Winning meant that her picture was put up in the store lobby, she got new

business cards with Nordstrom All-Star written on them, a 14-karat gold pin, a \$100 award, and was invited to represent her department at the regional meeting. At the regional meeting, they read my letter and everyone gave Stephanie a standing ovation. "This is what we want all of our employees to be like!" said the manager who read the letter. She got to meet three of the Nordstrom brothers, who were each very complimentary. I was already a little overwhelmed when Stephanie took my hand.

"But that's not the best part, Tyree," she said. "The day of that first store meeting, I took a list of the nominees, and put your letter behind it, with the 100-dollar bill behind that. I took it home and gave it to my father. He read everything and looked at me and said, 'When do you find out who won?'"

"I said, 'I won, Dad.'"

"He looked me right in the eye and said, 'Stephanie, I'm really proud of you.'"

Quietly, she said, "My dad has never said he was proud of me."

I think I'll remember that moment all my life. That was when I realized what a powerful gift appreciation can be. Shelly's appreciation of her workers had set into motion a chain of events—Stephanie's beautiful basket, my letter, Nordstrom's award—that had changed at least three lives. Though I'd heard it all my life, it was the Christmas when I was an elf—and a broke teenager—that I truly came to understand that the littlest things can make the biggest difference.



# The Curmudgeon

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By Walter Harter

Mr. Alakan hated Christmas. I didn't know the reason until I had worked in his photographic studio for almost five years.

He was an excellent photographer. I hoped to learn some of his skills, especially retouching negatives, and then, in time, have a studio of my own. He hadn't promised to teach me, and he didn't. I started in the studio washing trays, mixing chemicals, sweeping up, delivering orders on occasion, and doing everything else he gruffly ordered me to do. What I learned about photography I picked up by watching him and asking questions. Sometimes he'd answer, but mostly he'd continue working as if he hadn't heard. But I had learned.

He was Polish, and he and his sister Freda had come to the United States after World War II. He had been a young photographer in Poland, and after working various studios in his new country, had opened one of his own in my town, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. He was tall and thin, with shoulders bowed from years bent over the retouching desk. He had a mane of white hair and lined, leathery cheeks. But his eyes were what you noticed first. Pale blue, they appeared to float in pools of water. I had always expected those pools to overflow, but they didn't.

The month of December in the fourth year I was with him was busier than ever, and Mr. Alakan seemed even more depressed about the holiday. Whenever he raised his weary eyes from the retouching desk to stare out at the passing crowds, the colorful lights and decorations, he'd shake his head and go into his usual tirade about Christmas.

"Peace on Earth! All men brothers!" I always expected him to add "Bah! Humbug!" at those times, but apparently he'd never heard of Scrooge or Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. "Love for one another!" he'd go on. "People are animals. ... They call themselves Christians, but there's no Christ in their hearts. They're *animals*!"

Once when he spoke like that, I said, "Why not close the shop during December if you hate Christmas so much?" I was kidding, of course, for Christmas was when we did most of the year's business. And I added, "Go away for the month. Try to find someplace where Christmas isn't celebrated."

"Food and rent," he answered, again bending over his desk. "And ... other expenses."

I didn't realize what those "other expenses" were until one night early in my fifth year with him. Usually I left the studio at five o'clock, but Mr. Alakan stayed later, getting the negatives ready for the next day's printing, or just "tidying up" he'd say. But this night he was ready to leave when I was, and as we closed the door he said, in his gruff voice, "I'd like you to make a visit with me, if you have time."

Of course I agreed, for it was the first time he had ever suggested that I might glimpse something of his private life. I assumed that, in his grudging way, he was inviting me to the small apartment he shared with his sister Freda. I liked his sister. She was thin, small, with black hair piled high on her head, so much of it that she appeared top-heavy. She seldom came into the studio, for she worked all day, doing exquisite embroidery for one of the dressmakers in town.

"She's ill," he said as we walked along the street. His rough voice was almost soft, so soft I could barely hear when he added, "She wants to see you."

I hadn't known. But I had missed her, for we'd had pleasant chats when she did come into the studio. She hadn't been in for months. I assumed she was in the hospital, but I was wrong. We passed the hospital and walked several streets farther on to the town's only nursing home.

Freda was in a private room. A nurse was sitting beside the bed. "She has just awakened," the nurse said as we entered.

Mr. Alakan went to the bed, held his sister's hand for a moment, then went to the window and stared out into the street. Obviously he was just as reticent with her as he was with me. When he went out to talk to the nurse, I felt awkward at being alone with Freda. She was thinner than I remembered, and the black hair seemed darker in comparison with her white face. It was loose and hung around her shoulders like a young girl's.

Freda put her hand out to me. I took it—and at that moment I saw something that made me feel as though a cold hand had clutched me. A series of numbers had been tattooed on her white skin. I knew what they were. I had read about and seen pictures of the terrible events of World War II—the forced-labor and concentration camps—but somehow they had seemed unreal until I saw that string of numbers on the thin white arm.

She spoke little, and I, being young and slightly embarrassed, even less. But we did hold hands, and we did look into each other's eyes. She said one thing I've always remembered. "Be patient with my brother. He's a good man, but he's bitter about what happened. Even the happy memories are painful to him." Her voice was low, a whisper, and then she closed her eyes in sleep.

Mr. Alakan and I parted when we reached the street, I with a called "Good night!" and he with a curt nod. All the way home those numbers on the white arm stayed in my mind. I was sure that a similar series was on Mr. Alakan's arm. And I began to understand what the past had done to him, and how awful those years must have been for him and his family.

Late in November Freda died. There were only a few people at the funeral: her brother and I, the dressmaker and some women for whom Freda had done her embroidery.

Mr. Alakan seemed to become even more morose during that busy December. But we worked together quite well, except for his occasional outbursts of temper that seemed to become more frequent.

One of those explosions came a few days before Christmas. He had sent me to the darkroom to get a set of small knives he used to retouch difficult negatives. But I couldn't find them. I searched every shelf. And then I saw a small wooden box on the top one, almost hidden from sight. I had to use a stepladder to reach it. The cover had a Christmas tree painted on it.

When I lifted the lid, tinkling notes cascaded from it. I recognized the tune as "O Tannenbaum, O Tannenbaum" ("O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree"), a song a German family, friends of mine, sang at Christmastime. But before the tune ended, the box was roughly grabbed from my hands by Mr. Alakan, who had come into the darkroom.

"She shouldn't have brought it!" he shouted, slamming shut the lid of the little music box. "It took up space, and we had only our clothes! ..." He stopped. "Go back to the studio," he ordered angrily.

Although Mr. Alakan's temper explosions were sudden and violent, they didn't last long. When he returned to his desk he did something he had never done before.

He apologized, and for the first time said something about his past.

"That music box was our mother's. We always played it at Christmastime." He kept working at the negative on his easel, not looking at me. "Our parents ... they were taken away from us. We never saw them again after the night they came to the house. People are animals ... animals."

A few days before Christmas, a small boy entered the studio. He was about 12 years old. A solemn little fellow. He stood still, looking around at the pictures on the walls. We had stopped taking portraits many days before, and were hurrying to get orders ready to be picked up before Christmas.

"I want my picture taken," the boy said. "I want you to take it from the side." He didn't seem to understand when Mr. Alakan told him we were no longer taking orders for pictures.

"It's a present for my mother," the boy persisted.

I waited for the explosion. Mr. Alakan stared past the boy at the crowds in the street. He took a deep breath, then said, "The cheapest portrait is five dollars." (That was a long time ago, but even then the price was meant to discourage the boy.)

"I only have two." The boy held out two crumpled bills.

Again I waited for the explosion. Instead, the old photographer was silent, staring down into the serious young face. He appeared to be struggling, making up his mind. Then, in a loud exasperated tone he said: "All right, but no proofs! Ready Christmas Eve!"

He turned and almost ran toward the camera room at the rear of the studio, the boy following at a trot. There were flashes of light, and the two were back in the studio. The boy was almost to the door when he stopped and looked back. "Could you cut out my picture? I mean with scissors?"

Mr. Alakan just stared at him. As the boy left, I, too, couldn't help but be confused by his strange request.

We worked long hours those last couple of days, but at last it was late afternoon on Christmas Eve. All the orders had been called for—except one. Mr. Alakan kept glancing at the long envelope and shaking his head. "And he didn't even give me the two dollars," he finally said.

We were getting ready to close when the bell over the door sounded and the boy stood in the studio. But this time someone was with him—a woman, rather young and smiling. Her hand was on his shoulder.

"Is my present ready?" the boy asked Mr. Alakan as he held out the two crumpled bills.

Mr. Alakan picked up the envelope and started toward the boy and the woman. Then he stopped suddenly. Mr. Alakan looked at the pair for several seconds, then, with the envelope still in his hands, hurried back into the dark room. I heard the sound of scissors, and the high squeal of the press we used for mounting pictures.

At last he came back into the studio. In his hands was one of our best folders and mounted on it silhouette—"cut out" as the boy had requested—was a picture of the boy in profile. He had fixed the cut-out picture on thick cardboard.

The woman was smiling, but she was looking past the old photographer, not at him. And at that moment, I saw what Mr. Alakan had seen. The boy's mother was blind. The "cut out" picture was meant for her fingers to trace.

"Thank you!" the boy said excitedly as he tucked the picture under his arm. "Merry Christmas to you, sir!"

Mr. Alakan watched as the boy led the woman gently into the busy street. Then he slowly started back toward the darkroom.

“Mr. Alakan,” I said, “you forgot the two dollars.”

Mr. Alakan stopped for a moment and looked at the two crumpled bills on the showcase. And I saw that at long last those watery pouches had overflowed, and that the wrinkled cheeks were wet.

It had snowed steadily most of the day, and I had trudged through the drifts for several blocks on my way home before I remembered I’d left behind in the studio a gift for one of my friends. I turned and plowed back.

The studio was dark, but I had a key, for I usually opened the place an hour or so before Mr. Alakan came in. But when I stood inside I knew he was still there, for a light showed under the door of the darkroom. Also I could hear music, a bell-like tinkling sound. It was the music box. I stood for a moment listening to “O Tannenbaum,” then I picked up the package I’d come back for and quietly closed the door behind me.

The studio was closed between Christmas and the New Year, for business would be poor, and it would only waste electricity and heat to be open.

On January second I had two surprises. First, Mr. Alakan was in the studio before I got there. Second, there seemed to be a change in his manner. He began to treat me differently. No longer were my questions

answered with grunts and impatient hand motions. To my astonishment, he seemed eager to teach me. In the following months I learned more about the craft of portraiture than I had in the previous five years.

I came to the conclusion that the change in Mr. Alakan began with that boy and his blind mother. That one small act of human love was like a chink in the dam of his bitterness, and whether Mr. Alakan realized it or not I’m not sure, but at last he had felt the transforming power of Christmas.

A few months later Mr. Alakan passed away, at his desk retouching negatives, the place where he would have wanted to die. The studio was closed and the stock and equipment put up for sale to satisfy creditors—mostly the bank where he had borrowed the money to keep his sister in the nursing home.

I had saved a little money, and the bank agreed that would serve as down payment on the total sum. I could pay off the balance monthly. So the studio and equipment became mine.

In cleaning the darkroom, I found the old music box. As the years passed I played that little box often at Christmastime. And I did what Mr. Alakan had finally done for me—I taught every young man who came to work in my studio all I could about photography.

## *Flossie*

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*By Jimmy Cannon*

**T**he Christmas after he came back from covering the war in Korea, the man’s right eye was infected.

His vision was obscured by a medication the nurse put into his eye every hour

around the clock. The sedatives handled the pain, but not all of it. They didn’t give him anything for the fear of going blind. There isn’t a pill for that.

So at twilight, led there by boredom

and loneliness, the man went to the visitor's room when it was unoccupied. He closed both his eyes, and then opened the bad one. It was the most beautiful sight he had ever seen. This was a private view of Christmas. The city was secretly decorated for his personal entertainment. The lights ran together in a fury of confusion. The colors of the metropolitan twilight became spilled dye flowing out of a child's dream of Christmas.

After looking at the wonderful scenery of his sickness, the man strolled to the night nurse's desk to chat. They had sent most of the patients from the children's ward home for Christmas. It was shut down. Three of the children had been brought to the floor where the man was to spend Christmas. One was Flossie.

Here stood Flossie, small and sedate in her matron bathrobe. There she was inside her silence, as if it were a garment she wore, a child with russet hair, prim and yet defiant.

She is, the nurse said, the perfect patient who has adjusted to the routine of hospitals so long that she doesn't find them strange. The other children cried, the nurse said, but Flossie was brave and dignified and not even afraid of needles.

The flattery didn't touch Flossie; she examined the man with a decent curiosity. The dark glasses and his heavy beard didn't seem odd. In her childhood, spent in so many hospitals, all people had flaws. No one was whole, only doctors and nurses.

Flossie had a cleft palate. There had been a series of operations. One of the great surgeons had become interested in her case. It was slow, but Flossie had been educated to wait.

Flossie, the nurse said with a sorrow that wasn't professional, refused to talk.

The ridicule of other children had forced her into the refuge of silence. Bantering playmates had imitated the crippled voice. So Flossie talked to no one.

The man, who is a bachelor, is clumsy with children. But this pretty child was not one of them but a tiny adult, experienced in pain and humiliation. The man leaned down and awkwardly attempted to be casual.

"My name is Jimmy," the man said. "You're Flossie and we're neighbors." The blue eyes, clear and suspicious, were sad in their beauty. The man asked Flossie about her dolls and her storybooks. What did she get for Christmas? There was no reply, only that somberly interested look. The man shook her hand and returned to his room.

He was dozing when the nurse knocked. With her was Flossie, who held a picture book. The nurse said Flossie had been found wandering in the corridors, tapping on doors and calling the name of Jimmy in her strangled voice. It was, the nurse said, the first time she had heard the child speak.

The nurse left them together. The man, who finds all children strangers, sat on the bed and Flossie pretended to read from the book. He will never forget that voice, tortured and grotesque, and he was very close to weeping. After that, Flossie came every day and explained the same pictures to him. But she wouldn't utter a sound if there was anyone else present.

It is a Christmas the man will remember forever. He is everlastingly grateful to Flossie. She gave him the most precious of all gifts when she allowed him to reach her.

Never before had I felt the true meaning of this day until I heard Flossie say Merry Christmas.

# Tornado

*By Charlotte Hale Smith*

On the day before Christmas two years ago, the pastures of River Bend Farm near Covington, Georgia, were lush-green with winter rye grass. There, lording castle-like over 700 neat acres, was the dairy barn, two stories high and large enough for the herd of 65 Holsteins on the ground floor, tons of stored hay and feed on the second. This was what River Bend Farm was like on the day before Christmas. On Christmas morning, the rye grass was still lush green, but there was no barn; there was little left of the herd of Holsteins.

On the night that remembers Christ's birth, a ghostly tornado swirled through the Georgia countryside, delivering not birth but destruction and death. The tornado was ghostly because no one at River Bend Farm saw it or felt its true havoc.

At five AM that Christmas morning, the Polk brothers, J.T., Jr. and Charles, started out in their pickup truck for their morning chores. The Polks, who owned River Bend Farm, were progressive farmers. They were much respected in the area as good men and good farmers. Over the years they had improved their land, and their herd had maintained one of the best production and quality records in the state. Both men—the very tall, tanned, laconic J.T. and the fast-moving Charles—had a love for farming. This love showed itself in unexpected ways, like the affectionate names they had for each one of their many cows.

But this morning was unusually warm; the fog thick as cream.

"Look, Charlie, last night's wind tore down the fence," J.T. said.

"Electric line's down too," Charles said, alarmed. "Get a flashlight and help me find the cows."

Then they heard the lowing in the distance—deep, frightened sounds of distress. The brothers dashed through the fog only to stop, unbelieving. What had been an enormous barn was now a grotesquely flattened mass of splintered wood.

"The cows! Look for the cows!" J.T. yelled as he lunged off toward the pasture, hoping the animals hadn't escaped through the broken fence.

It was Charles who recognized the worst. "Come back, J.T.!" he screamed. "The cows are in the barn!"

They didn't stop to think. They rushed in and started pulling bales of hay off the cows that were still alive. Other cows lay dead, twisted and crushed beneath the wreckage, suffocated by the 200 tons of hay that had fallen on them.

Once the brothers recognized the impossible task that faced them, they ran to the milking barn, called Civil Defense authorities, then raced back to their animals.

And soon, help came. Neighbors. Trucks. The implement company in nearby Covington sent two bulldozers; a neighbor arrived with a third. By daybreak the pastures and drives swarmed with people. Some came to watch; most stayed to work. When the Polks' driveway filled with trucks and machinery, friends cut the barbed wire to make new access. A State patrolman assumed traffic duty.

By afternoon, J.T. and Charles were in a daze, but they and nearly a hundred volunteers kept working, forgetting their Christmas stockings and the turkeys that would have to go in the ovens another day. The bulldozers dug in and pushed the debris aside, veterinarians ministered to injured animals, farmers loaded salvaged hay onto waiting trucks. The town's two hardware stores opened and distributed work gloves, pitchforks, and shovels. Someone drove a hay baler to the scene and men retrieved scattered hay, rebaled it, and loaded it aboard trucks.

By nightfall, River Bend farm was neat again. There was a foundation dug and ready for a new barn. Exhausted, indescribably grateful, the brothers went home. Grateful they were, but beaten down. They had lost 47 cows. They faced a desperate future.

But the Polks had not reckoned fully with their neighbors. The community rallied even after Christmas had passed. They started bringing cows, one or two at a time, as gifts from farmers nearby and across the state. Mennonite farmers from Montezuma, Georgia—men utterly unknown to Covington farmers—brought 13 Holsteins, all top-quality milk cows, and all gifts. And a fine Holstein cost \$350 or more.

Other people gave money. Friends contributed \$50, \$100; one man gave \$1,000. Fellow dairymen raised nearly \$4,000, and there were people they didn't know who sent smaller sums from far across the United States.

Good deeds multiplied. A farm equipment firm replaced ruined implements at cost. Farmers donated feed. Neighbors helped raise a new barn from materials donated or bought at cost, and the building contractor gave his skills.

The Polks' wives wrote thank-you letters to as many people as they could, then worried because they couldn't track down everyone who helped.

Within six weeks, River Bend Farm had resumed operations falteringly. By spring, new calves frisked in the pastures, and by summer the farm had begun to beat its own production records.

Christmas. It is returning again as it does every year, as it does everywhere, finding people in sorrow, in joy, in the emptiness or fullness of life. The Polks these years are different from the year of the tornado. They are better for their neighbors; they have been filled with the meaning of brotherhood, the meaning which so much of the world forgets—or refuses to remember.

## *Reach Out in Faith*

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*By Nita Schuh*

**I**t was Christmas Eve, and we had many more than the usual blessings for which we were deeply grateful. Chief among them was my husband's remarkable progress toward recovery following a heart attack in early October.

After a quiet dinner before a gaily decorated fireplace ablaze with Yule logs, we attended church services at 11 o'clock. Then, in a mood of celebration and joy, we invited friends home with us for midnight refreshments.

As soon as they departed, I suggested that my husband retire and I would clear the table and walk our dog. He agreed without protest, although he assured me that he was not overly fatigued from the evening's activities. It had been a perfect Christmas Eve. We wished each other "Merry Christmas" and he went to bed.

About six o'clock on Christmas morning, my husband awakened with what he described as "mild discomfort." Alarmed that he might be having another heart attack, I suggested we go to the hospital immediately. But he demurred, saying he didn't really feel that bad.

"I probably ate more than I should have last night," he laughingly said. "Besides," he added, "I don't want to spend Christmas Day in the hospital."

Nevertheless, I insisted we go, merely as a precaution, reminding him we could continue our Christmas celebration "tomorrow or the next day," and he reluctantly agreed.

We began the 45-mile drive to the military hospital in which he had previously been a patient. We had driven about 20 miles on the turnpike when suddenly, my husband gasped, pressed his hands to his chest, and barely managed to utter, "You'll have to hurry, Honey."

He was perspiring, his face ashen, and his breathing was becoming labored and uneven. He was obviously in extreme pain! Too late I realized that, despite his earlier assurances to the contrary, we indeed were confronted by a major emergency. I should have headed for the nearest hospital instead of continuing the long drive to the military hospital, which now seemed an unattainable destination.

What should I do? Turn around and go to a civilian hospital? Proceed? We were only halfway there, but his records were

at the military hospital and the physician who had attended him during the October episode was on the staff. Gunning the little Opel station wagon past 90 mph, I sped toward the military base.

"Hurry, hurry," my husband urged; his lips were blue and trembling. "Can't you drive any faster?" Terrified, both of his condition and of losing control of the car, I tried to comply.

I remembered Dr. P's admonition: "We can do nothing if our patient is DOA (Dead On Arrival)." I could not ... would not ... allow this to happen! *Somehow, I must keep him breathing, conscious, listening, until we get to the hospital. Then everything will be all right. ...*

I kept up a steady monologue. "Darling, please hang in there. We'll be there soon. You cannot die now. I won't have it, you hear? I love you. ... I'm doing all I can and you've got to help me by staying alive. Hang on! ... We're almost there ... almost there ... we're going to make it!"

"It'll be okay, angel," was all he could manage to reply.

Approaching the entrance to the military base, I lowered the car window and shouted to the gate guard, "Medical emergency!" and roared through the 30 mph zone at more than double that speed, careening to a stop at the emergency entrance of the hospital. I shouted, "Heart attack!" to the medical technician who came running.

Quickly, efficiently, the medical staff took charge and, gratefully, I saw my husband admitted into the Coronary Care Unit, empty until our arrival.

To my dismay, Dr. P. had just completed rounds and, having been relieved of duty, had left the military complex for the holiday. This worried me, not only because both my husband and I had much confidence in his medical knowledge

and expertise, but he was also familiar with my husband's case history, and this seemed terribly important to me in bringing him through this present crisis.

I was assured, however, that Dr. K., staff assistant to Dr. P., was also an excellent cardiologist and he was on duty. This partially relieved my anxiety. I relinquished my husband into his professional care.

My husband's condition was critical, the outcome uncertain. At times he seemed to rally and I would be filled with encouragement. Then another crisis would arise and terror seized me.

The senior nurse, a colonel whom we knew and admired, urged me to go for food, a cup of coffee, a walk. I asked her, "Please tell me, how is my husband?"

She looked at me, her eyes holding my own in a steady gaze for what seemed like an age. Then she replied quietly, "Mrs. Schuh, what do you want me to say?" That was all. We both knew what I wanted her to say; she couldn't.

Looking away, I murmured, "Thank you," aware that her refusal to engage in platitudes or empty kindnesses had been both the kindest and most professional thing she could've done.

I sat beside my husband's bed most of day, often holding his hand. He seemed to sense that I was there and wanted me near. Evening came and eventually Dr. K. made his final rounds and departed for his quarters on the base. Sometime after midnight, as I continued to sit beside my husband's bed, my head resting on a pillow, I became aware that the nurse at her station nearby was dialing the telephone, hanging up, and repeating the process ... over and over. Alarmed, I approached her and asked, "Is something wrong?" and looked at the monitoring machine on her desk. Even to my untrained eye it was obvious that something was very wrong.

"I think it best if Dr. K. comes back," she replied. "I'm calling him now." Then she added, "I'm sure there is nothing to be concerned about. I just think he might want to be here." I didn't believe her, of course, but I did not question or contradict her.

She finally reached the doctor and shortly thereafter he hurried in. He asked me to leave, and to my horror, I smelled alcohol on his breath.

How much had he imbibed since leaving the hospital an hour or two earlier? As a trained professional working in the field of alcohol-abuse education, I knew that even a small quantity of alcohol could adversely affect one's judgment. My husband was critically ill, perhaps dying, and he needed all the medical skill and judgment available.

Nevertheless, it was him in the CCU, and it was his skill and knowledge that somehow must be employed in overcoming this new and life-threatening situation. Intuitively, I knew that more than human skill, even at its best, was necessary for my husband's survival. Sitting alone in the darkened corridor, I tried to pray, both for my husband and for the physician.

All at once I was overwhelmed with an awareness of His Presence. No, I did not feel Him physically. Nor did I see Him. But He was there. The previously dark and empty corridor seemed suddenly filled with a wonderful, all-enveloping beneficence. And though I heard no audible voice, I knew He had said to me, as He had said to the biblical woman, *Take heart, daughter, your faith has made you* (in my case, my husband) *well*.

I remembered the account in the Scriptures of the woman who said, "If I only touch His garment, I shall be made well" (Matthew 9:21 RSV). She not only

had prayed, she had also acted in faith by touching His garment—prayer plus faith! This was what was required of me, as well. I must demonstrate my faith not only in words, but also in deeds. But how? What “deed”?

The image of that ill woman stayed with me. But I couldn’t do what she had done! After all, Jesus had been alive and in their midst then.

But then I thought, *He is alive now, too, and has promised to be in our midst, through the Holy Spirit. He is just as real, just as accessible to me, as He was to that woman of faith so long ago.*

Did my faith match hers? Tentatively, with eyes closed and head bowed, I reached out my hand. Nothing. I reached farther. Still nothing.

Now boldly I prayed: “O Lord, as that woman reached out and touched You and immediately was healed, I, acting in that same faith, reach out and touch You. I pray that You will heal my husband, and I thank You for doing so.”

And this time, I stretched forth my hand, eagerly extending my fingertips just as far as I could reach ... stretching, reaching, farther and farther.

How long I sat, with my arm outstretched, or when the Presence departed, I cannot say. Perhaps only seconds, no more than a few minutes at most. I knew that, however weak and faltering my faith had been in the past, and no doubt would be again, for those few moments I had truly believed! And that faith had meant LIFE in its fullest measure.

I knew that I would never be quite the same again, and I also knew, with a certainty born of that faith, that my husband would survive the night and recover.

Some time later, Dr. K. appeared and told me my husband was resting more comfortably, the crisis apparently past. The doctor then returned to his quarters.

This time, it did not trouble me that he would not be on the CCU floor for a while. The Great Physician was in attendance. I returned to my husband’s bedside where, as I had expected, I found him sleeping peacefully. I slipped my hand into his, and though he did not hear me, I whispered into his ear, “Merry Christmas, Darling. You are going to get well.”

And he did.

## *Something Special for Angela*

*By Marion Bond West*

“Mama,” Jennifer sighed, “Angela’s mother lets her do a lot of the cooking. Angela’s mother teaches her how to do it.”

“That’s nice,” I answered, not looking up as I cracked an egg into my mixing bowl.

“Know something else?” Jennifer continued as if I were really carrying on a

conversation with her. “Her mother goes to the movies with her, even if it’s a movie just for children.”

“Uh-huh,” I murmured as I stirred the corn bread and glanced at the oven to be sure I’d turned it on.

Jennifer started to say something else, but the phone rang. As I became involved

in the phone conversation, she slipped out of the kitchen.

After that, though, I often heard about Angela and her mother, and one day Angela came home from school with Jennifer. I liked her right away. She was a slim child with a wonderful smile that seemed to explode quietly. She spoke softly and wasn't silly as many 12-year-olds can be.

Later, when I drove Angela home, I went in to meet her mother. She was standing at the sink and she turned and flashed a smile at me just as bright as her daughter's. I felt welcomed. We chatted for a few minutes. She was the kind of person I wanted to know better.

Just before Christmas Jennifer told me that Angela's mother was in the hospital, but that she might be home for Christmas.

"Well, she probably will," I answered brightly. "I certainly hope so, anyway."

"She's having some treatments. Co ... something. I can't remember the name," Jennifer said.

"Cobalt?" I asked, not even liking to say the word.

"Yes, that's it. What does it mean?"

*Surely Jennifer's wrong, I thought. Twelve-year-olds often get things terribly mixed up.*

Jennifer didn't wait for me to answer about the treatments, and I was grateful. Instead, she talked on some more about Angela's mother being sick.

Jennifer had been out of school several days with a virus, so she and Angela were out of touch. She talked about calling Angela to find out how her mother was, but decided to wait and see her at school the next day.

Just then my twin sons came in from school, both talking at once. "Mama, our bus patrol's mother died. Can we have money for flowers?"

Fear twisted my heart. "Yes, of course. What was the matter with her?"

"She had ... cancer," one of the boys answered.

Jennifer spoke softly, "What was your bus patrol's name?"

"Um ... John Michael."

"Mama," Jennifer whispered, "that's Angela's mother."

A call to the school confirmed that Angela's mother had died the day before. "I have to go see Angela, Mama," Jennifer said softly. "Will you take me?"

"Of course," I answered.

We went by a shopping center on the way and Jennifer selected an arrangement of cactus plants in a dainty hand-painted dish. "She'll like this," Jennifer said, pleased with her purchase. But as we drove on to Angela's house, Jennifer's face clouded. "Mama, I don't know what to say to her."

"You'll know when you see her. Don't plan anything."

A relative answered the door and told us they were all out of town for the funeral. They would be back the day before Christmas Eve.

Jennifer didn't leave the cactus plants. "I'll bring it back," she told the man who had answered the door. He smiled and nodded.

The day before Christmas the phone rang and Jennifer answered it. "It's Angela," she whispered to me. "She wants me to come see her."

So we went back with the plants in hand. I was a bit startled to see that the front door had been gaily decorated. Angela greeted us with her radiant smile and welcomed us in. Her father wasn't at home, but she introduced us to her grandmother and grandfather. Her little brother played with a small truck and looked up at the Christmas tree often. It

was large and tall, touching the ceiling. Stockings hung by the fireplace; a small Nativity scene sat on a table.

Angela was pleased with the gift, touching it ever so gently with one finger. As Angela took Jennifer into the den to show her the Christmas tree, I sat at the kitchen table and talked with Angela's paternal grandparents. "Their mother suffered so much the last few months ... so much," her grandfather told me. "The children knew how terribly she was suffering. Janet, Angela's mother, had known for eight years that she had cancer. She had expected to live only a short while."

Jennifer's words drifted through my mind with sudden clarity. "Angela's mother..."

Angela came home with us for the afternoon. I had a few errands to run and when I introduced Angela to one of my friends, she flashed that warm smile of hers. When my friend wished Jennifer and Angela a merry Christmas, Jennifer looked at Angela uncertainly. But Angela answered for them both with quiet enthusiasm, "Merry Christmas to you, too."

It seemed each time I glanced at Angela during the afternoon, she would smile quickly and reassuringly at me. When her daddy came to pick her up, she thanked us for having her over and wished us a very heartfelt merry Christmas. I watched her run to the car and join her father. They were going Christmas shopping.

Angela came back two days after Christmas and brought a knitted hanging basket to show us. She'd made it for

the cactus plants. She also brought some bread that she'd baked herself.

Her grandmother phoned and wanted to talk with her. I couldn't help but overhear part of the conversation. "You just pound the steak, Grandmother ... and I know the way Daddy and John Michael like their gravy. Let me make it. I'll be home in a little bit."

As Angela thanked me for the afternoon, I brushed back a strand of her long hair. I wanted to squeeze her to me, but I didn't. Her father waved to me from the car and I waved back. We'd met only once. Somehow I sensed this wasn't the time to speak to him, to offer him my sympathy.

But I wanted to do more than offer my sympathy. I wanted to say to him, "You must be so proud of Angela."

Back in the kitchen, as I started supper, I thought about Angela. Making gravy, grocery shopping, knitting, cleaning the house, having a daddy and a little brother who could depend on her, wishing others a merry Christmas this year when she'd suffered such a loss were just part of it. Angela's mother had taught her in 12 years what many of us never learn—how to live, how to go on living, fully, no matter how great the loss.

I saw her only once—just for a few moments—but I knew I wanted to be more like Angela's mother, and I had to begin sometime, somewhere.

Jennifer came into the kitchen and stood close to me like a small shadow, watching me peel the potatoes.

I handed her the peeler and said, "I could sure use some help, Jen. How about making the mashed potatoes tonight?"



# *The Lowly Task*

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*By Joyce M. Parker*

**S**urely something could relieve the gloom of working on a holiday.

I was a young, inexperienced probationer-nurse in a large London hospital many Christmases ago. Part of our duties included boiling bandages, washing rubber sheets, collecting dishes and, if the ward maids left early, finishing their chores too.

It was Christmas Eve, my first Christmas away from home, and I was homesick. The holiday promised to be a long one, filled with work. On Christmas morning, we were due on the wards by 7:30 AM and would have to remain on duty until 8:30 in the evening.

Now it was 8:30 PM Christmas Eve. Jackie, a fellow probationer, and I had settled our 30 patients for the night and faced a mountain of dishes left by the ward maids, who had hurried off duty to celebrate the holiday. Jackie and I were feeling resentful and full of self-pity as we worked. But at last the dishes were washed and stacked away and the floor cleaned.

"How about the other kitchen floor?" Jackie asked. There were two kitchens in the ward.

"How about it?" I echoed, disgruntled. "If they think I'm going to get on my hands and knees again and scrub that floor, they have another think coming. Not on Christmas Eve I won't." It was bad enough to be away from home and have your own work to do, but to do extra ...

Jackie nodded. "I agree. It's a bit much to expect us to do the work of ward maids as well as our own. We've already worked

half an hour past our off-duty time. Let's find Sister Smith and tell her we're going off duty."

We dragged our weary legs to the ward superintendent's office. But Sister Smith's ample form in its blue serge uniform and white starched cap could not be seen. We looked in the treatment rooms, the laundry, but couldn't find her anywhere. We didn't dare leave the ward without permission.

Hesitantly we stood in the small corridor between the two kitchens, wondering what to do. Almost without thinking, I opened the far kitchen door. There on her hands and knees, scrubbing the floor, was Sister Smith.

Jackie and I stood there, embarrassed. Sister Smith looked up and smiled.

"It's all right, nurses," she said. "The maids went off early and this floor was such a mess, I felt I had to scrub it before Christmas Day. But you go off duty. You've worked hard enough today and tomorrow will be busy too."

She must have sensed something of what we felt. Her eyes were warm and friendly as she continued. "I know it's your first Christmas away from home and you're probably missing your families. There's a service in the hospital chapel in half an hour. Maybe it will help."

Awkwardly we closed the kitchen door and stood looking at each other with flushed faces. At that moment the silence was broken by the sound of singing in the distance. The voices grew louder and a group of nurses carrying lanterns turned the corner and came into the corridor.

We'd forgotten the custom of the nurses who visited each ward on Christmas Eve singing Christmas carols.

The nurses' red cloaks shone warm in the light from the glowing lanterns and the words they sang rang clear and true.

*Once in royal David's city  
Stood a lowly cattle shed,  
Where a mother laid her Baby  
In a manger for His bed.  
Mary was that mother mild,  
Jesus Christ her little Child.*

I stared down at the floor, my eyes blurred with tears, suddenly ashamed. Jesus had done so much for me, yet I wouldn't even scrub a floor to follow His example of doing for others. Instead, my ward Sister had undertaken this lowly task without resentment.

*Forgive me, Lord, for my pride, I prayed inwardly. May I never forget this lesson of humility, especially at Christmastime.*

The singing voices floated through from the ward and as Jackie and I walked toward the chapel my heart lifted. It was Christmas Eve, and Christ was born.

## The Star

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By Harriet Wallace Rose

The classroom had that special festive Christmas atmosphere that can only be created by children. Handmade ornaments and bright paper Santas decorated the tree in the corner and a large colorful mural covered the two windows on the far wall of the room, forming a backdrop for the children's Christmas program.

I sat with the audience of parents and friends on the opposite side of the room, enjoying the children's portrayals of scenes from their Christmas calendar.

It was a scene that is repeated with some variations in classrooms all over town at this time of year. But this performance was special, for it was the Christmas program at the LaPorte County Therapy Center in Michigan City, Indiana; the children there were handicapped, crossing the "stage" on crutches or singing from a wheelchair.

Just that week the doctors had given me the bad news that my 18-month-old Nancy

was considered to be severely physically handicapped, probably retarded, and almost totally blind. Now I was no longer just an interested onlooker.

After the final skit the audience was asked to join the cast in singing Christmas carols, and then the physical therapist announced that little five-year-old Beth would be the star of *A Christmas Miracle*. I was somewhat startled. A miracle? I thought skeptically. If anyone is weary of looking for miracles, it must be the parents of handicapped children. Surely they—more than anyone else—must be resigned to the fact that there are no real miracles for their children.

Beth, the therapist explained, was a paraplegic; her legs had been paralyzed from birth. Injured adults with a similar paralysis have sometimes been trained to use their stomach muscles to move their legs. But an injured adult has the advantage of having walked before; to a child like

Beth, the mechanics of moving the legs are nearly impossible to learn.

The therapist stepped back into the hall, then re-entered behind a child-sized version of an invalid's walker. In the center of the walker, her narrow torso encircled by the rigid ring of padded leather beneath her arms, her frail legs extending stiffly to the floor, stood a radiant Beth, her small heart-shaped face glowing with pride as her hands clutched the curved metal bars of the walker.

Slowly, with the therapist guiding her from behind, Beth placed one thin brace-encased leg in front of the other. There was no sound but the slight scrape, scrape of heavy shoes dragging across the floor as Beth moved, inch by inch, across the wide room. The silent classroom seemed filled with a warm glow as Beth's wide brown eyes shone like the star of Bethlehem, never indicating the tremendous effort involved in each miraculous step. Her gaze never left her mother's face until she stood before her in the center of the room, acknowledging the thunderous applause with a proud bow of her head.

I was grateful for the applause that covered my noisy sniffing as I tried unsuccessfully to stop the tears from spilling down my cheeks. But as I glanced around the room I was bewildered, and a little embarrassed, to see that no one else seemed as emotionally undone as I was. *How can they help but cry?* I thought. I had never observed such a moving, dramatic, triumphant scene.

But no. Their faces were warm, smiling, full of compassion—but also something else I could not quite define. And then in a flash of realization I saw that their faces seemed filled with understanding. These parents were familiar with miracles.

To the parent of the retarded child, any step in learning is a miracle; to the parent of the crippled child, one small step is a

miracle. They viewed life with a real awareness of its wonder; my tears stemmed from my own inner blindness.

For how many times had I read that familiar promise made by the original Christmas Miracle—Jesus Christ Himself—and yet remained blind to its message? "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted," Jesus said (Matthew 5:4). Though great is the sorrow of a parent whose child has physical or mental handicaps, it is that parent who comes to understand the true meaning of a miracle. I realized, too, that with that knowledge I could face the future with new faith and hope.



# By Invitation of Jesus

By Peter Marshall\*

One bitterly cold December night, when Washington, D.C. was covered with a blanket of snow and ice, a man sat in his comfortable home on Massachusetts Avenue. A crackling log fire threw dancing shadows on the paneled walls.

The wind outside was moaning softly like someone in pain, and the reading lamp cast a soft, warm glow on the Book this man was reading.

He was alone, for the children had gone out for the evening, and his wife had retired early.

He read the following passage: "When thou makest a dinner or a supper, call not thy friends, nor thy brethren, neither thy kinsmen, nor thy rich neighbors. ... But when thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind" (Luke 14:12-13).

Somehow he could not get away from those simple words. He closed the Bible and sat musing, conscious for the first time in his life of the challenge of Christ, Whose birthday was so near.

What strange fancy was this? Why was it that he kept hearing in a whisper the words he had just read?

He could not shake it off. Never before had he been so challenged. *I must be sleepy*, he thought to himself. *It's time I went to bed.*

But as he lay in bed, he thought of the dinners and parties that they had given

in this beautiful home. Most of those whom he usually invited were listed in *Who's Who in Washington*.

He tried to sleep, but somehow he could not close the door of his mind to the procession of the poor that shuffled and tapped its way down the corridors of his soul.

As he watched them pass, he felt his own heart touched. He whispered a prayer that if the Lord would give him courage, he would take Him at His word and do what He wanted him to do; only then did he find peace and fall asleep.

When the morning came, his determination gave him new strength and zest for the day.

His first call was on the engraver who knew him well. At the counter he drafted the card, chuckling now and then as he wrote, his eyes shining. It read:

Jesus of Nazareth  
requests the honor of your presence  
at a banquet honoring  
The Sons of Want  
on Friday evening, in a home on  
Massachusetts Avenue.  
Cars will await you at the  
Central Union Mission  
at six o'clock.

At the bottom of the card was the quotation: *Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest* (Matthew 11:28).

\*Peter Marshall was a Scottish immigrant who entered the clergy and went on to become U.S. Senate Chaplain and the unofficial "conscience" of Washington. His life was the subject of a 1955 movie, *A Man Called Peter*.

A few days later, with the cards of invitation in his hand, he walked downtown. Within an hour, there were several people wondering what could be the meaning of the card that a kindly, happy, well-dressed man had placed in their hands.

One was an old man seated on a box trying to sell pencils; another stood on the corner with a racking cough and a bundle of papers under his arms. There was a blind man saying over and over to himself, "Jesus of Nazareth requests the honor of your presence. ..."

At six o'clock, a strange group of men stood waiting in the vestibule of the Central Union Mission.

"What is the catch in this, anyhow?" asked the cynic. "What's the game?"

The blind man ventured to remark: "Maybe it's part of the government relief program."

Just then someone came over and announced that the cars were at the door. Without a word, they went outside.

There was something incongruous about it all—these men, clutching their thin coats, huddling together, their faces pinched and wan, climbing into two shiny limousines. At last they were all inside, and the cars glided off with the strangest and most puzzled load of passengers ever carried.

When they dismounted on Massachusetts Avenue, they stood gazing at the house. Up the broad steps and over thick piled carpets, they entered slowly.

Their host was a quiet man, and they liked him—these guests of his, whose names he did not know.

He did not say much, only, "I am so glad you came."

By and by, they were seated at the table, with its spotless linen and gleaming silver. They were silent now; even the cynic had

nothing to say. It seemed as if the banquet would be held in frozen silence.

The host rose in his place. "My friends, let us ask the blessing.

"If this is pleasing to Thee, O Lord, bless us as we sit around this table, and bless the food that we are about to receive. Bless these men. You know who they are, and what they need. And help us to do what You want us to do. Amen."

The blind man was smiling now. He turned to the man seated next to him and asked about the host. "What does he look like?"

And so the ice was broken. Conversation began around the table, and soon the first course was laid.

It was a strange party, rather fantastic in a way, thought the host. His guests had no credentials, no social recommendations, no particular graces—so far as he could see. But, my, they were hungry!

Yet there was no trace of condescension in his attitude. He was treating them as brothers.

It was a grand feeling—a great adventure.

He watched each plate, and directed the servants with a nod or a glance. He encouraged them to eat; he laughed at their thinly disguised reluctance, until they laughed too.

As he sat there, it suddenly occurred to him how different was the conversation! There were no off-color stories, no whisperings of scandal, no one saying, "Well, I have it on good authority. ..."

They were talking about their friends in misfortune, wishing they were here too, wondering whether Charlie had managed to get a bed in the charity ward, whether Dick had stuck it out when he wanted to end it all, whether the little woman with the baby had found a job.

Wasn't the steak delicious!

When the meal was over, someone came in and sat down at the piano. Familiar melodies and old songs, filled the room, and then in a soft voice the pianist began to sing "Love's Old Sweet Song," "Silver Threads Among the Gold," "The Sidewalks of New York."

Someone else joined in, a cracked wheezing voice, but it started the others. Men who had not sung for months, men who had no reason to sing, joined in.

Before they knew it, they were singing hymns: "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," "The Church in the Wildwood," "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross."

Then the pianist stopped, and the guests grouped themselves in soft, comfortable chairs around the log fire. The host, moving among them with a smile, said, "I know you men are wondering what all this means. I can tell you very simply but, first, let me read you something."

He read from the Gospels, stories of One who moved among the sick, the outcasts, the despised and the friendless; how Jesus healed this one, cured that one, spoke kindly words of infinite meaning to another, and what He promised to all who believed in Him.

"Now I haven't done much tonight for you, but it has made me very happy to have you here in my home. I hope you have enjoyed it half as much as I have, and if I have given you one evening of happiness, I shall be forever glad to remember it. But this is not my party. It is His! I have merely lent Him this house. He was your Host. He is your Friend. And He has given me the honor of speaking for Him.

"He is sad when you are. He hurts when you do. He weeps when you weep. He wants to help you—if you will let Him.

"I'm going to give each of you His Book of Instructions. Certain passages in it are marked, which I hope you will find helpful when you are sick and in pain, when you are lonely and discouraged. Then I shall see each one of you tomorrow, where I saw you today, and we'll have a talk together to see just how I can help you most."

They shuffled out into the night with a new light in their eyes, a smile where there had not been even interest before. The blind man was smiling still, and as he stood on the doorstep, waiting, he turned to where his host stood.

"God bless you, my friend, whoever you are."

A little wizened fellow who had not spoken all night paused to say, "I'm going to try again, mister. There's somethin' worth livin' for."

The cynic turned back, "Mister, you're the first man who ever gave me anything. And you've given me hope."

"That is because I was doing it for Him," said the host, and he stood and waved good night as the cars purred off into the darkness.

When they had gone, he sat again by the fire and looked at the dying embers, until the feeling became overwhelming, again, that there was Someone in the room. Someone who stood in the shadows and smiled too, because some of the least of these had been treated like brothers for His sake.

