



Christmas
Stories

"Truce In the Forest"

by Fritz Vincken

It was Christmas Eve, and the last, desperate German offensive of World War II raged around our tiny cabin. Suddenly, there was a knock on the door... " When we heard the knock on our door that Christmas Eve in 1944, neither Mother nor I had the slightest inkling of the quiet miracle that lay in store for us.

I was 12 then, and we were living in a small cottage in the Hürtgen Forest, near the German-Belgian border. Father had stayed at the cottage on hunting weekends before the war; when Allied bombers partly destroyed our hometown of Aachen, he sent us to live there. He had been ordered into the civil-defense fire guard in the border town of Monschau, four miles away.

"You'll be safe in the woods," he had told me. "Take care of Mother. Now you're the man of the family."

But, nine days before Christmas, Field Marshal von Rundstedt had launched the last, desperate German offensive of the war, and now, as I went to the door, the Battle of the Bulge was raging all around us. We heard the incessant booming of field guns; planes soared continuously overhead; at night, searchlights stabbed through the darkness. Thousands of Allied and German soldiers were fighting and dying nearby.

When that first knock came, Mother quickly blew out the candles; then, as I went to answer it, she stepped ahead of me and pushed open the door. Outside, like phantoms against the snowclad trees, stood two steel-helmeted men. One of them spoke to Mother in a language we did not understand, pointing to a third man lying in the snow. She realized before I did that these were American soldiers. Enemies!

Mother stood silent, motionless, her hand on my shoulder. They were armed and could have forced their entrance, yet they stood there and asked with their eyes. And the wounded man seemed more dead than alive. "Kommt rein," Mother said finally. "Come in." The soldiers carried their comrade inside and stretched him out on my bed.

None of them understood German. Mother tried French, and one of the soldiers could converse in that language. As Mother went to look after the wounded man, she said to me, "The fingers of those two are numb. Take off their jackets and boots, and bring in a bucket of snow." Soon I was rubbing their blue feet with snow.

We learned that the stocky, dark-haired fellow was Jim; his friend, tall and slender, was Robin. Harry, the wounded one, was now sleeping on my bed, his face as white as the snow outside. They'd lost their battalion and had wandered in the forest for three days, looking for the Americans, hiding from the Germans. They hadn't shaved, but still, without their heavy coats, they looked merely like big boys. And that was the way Mother began to treat them.

Now Mother said to me, "Go get Hermann. And bring six potatoes."

This was a serious departure from our pre-Christmas plans. Hermann was the plump rooster(named after portly Hermann G ring, Hitler's No. 2, for whom Mother had little affection) that we had been fattening for weeks in the hope that Father would be home for Christmas. But, some hours before, when it was obvious that Father would not make it, Mother had decided that Hermann should live a



few more days, in case Father could get home for New Year's. Now she had changed her mind again: Hermann would serve an immediate, pressing purpose.

While Jim and I helped with the cooking, Robin took care of Harry. He had a bullet through his upper leg, and had almost bled to death. Mother tore a bedsheet into long strips for bandages.

Soon, the tempting smell of roast chicken permeated our room. I was setting the table when once again there came a knock at the door.

Expecting to find more lost Americans, I opened the door without hesitation. There stood four soldiers, wearing uniforms quite familiar to me after five years of war. They were Wehrmacht; Germans!

I was paralyzed with fear. Although still a child, I knew the harsh law: sheltering enemy soldiers constituted high treason. We could all be shot! Mother was frightened, too. Her face was white, but she stepped outside and said, quietly, "Fröhliche Weihnachten." The soldiers wished her a Merry Christmas, too.

"We have lost our regiment and would like to wait for daylight," explained the corporal. "Can we rest here?"

"Of course," Mother replied, with a calmness born of panic. "You can also have a fine, warm meal and eat till the pot is empty."

The Germans smiled as they sniffed the aroma through the half-open door. "But," Mother added firmly, "we have three other guests, whom you may not consider friends." Now her voice was suddenly sterner than I'd ever heard it before. "This is Christmas Eve, and there will be no shooting here."

"Who's inside?" the corporal demanded. "Amerikaner?"

Mother looked at each frost-chilled face. "Listen," she said slowly. "You could be my sons, and so could those in there. A boy with a gunshot wound, fighting for his life. His two friends lost like you and just as hungry and exhausted as you are. This one night," she turned to the corporal and raised her voice a little, "this Christmas night, let us forget about killing."

The corporal stared at her. There were two or three endless seconds of silence. Then Mother put an end to indecision. "Enough talking!" she ordered and clapped her hands sharply. "Please put your weapons here on the woodpile and hurry up before the others eat the dinner!"

Dazedly, the four soldiers placed their arms on the pile of firewood just inside the door: three carbines, a light machine gun and two bazookas. Meanwhile, Mother was speaking French rapidly to Jim. He said something in English, and to my amazement I saw the American boys, too, turn their weapons over to Mother.

Now, as Germans and Americans tensely rubbed elbows in the small room, Mother was really on her mettle. Never losing her smile, she tried to find a seat for everyone. We had only three chairs, but Mother's bed was big, and on it she placed two of the newcomers side by side with Jim and Robin.



Despite the strained atmosphere, Mother went right on preparing dinner. But Hermann wasn't going to grow any bigger, and now there were four more mouths to feed. "Quick," she whispered to me, "get more potatoes and some oats. These boys are hungry, and a starving man is an angry one."

While foraging in the storage room, I heard Harry moan. When I returned, one of the Germans had put on his glasses to inspect the American's wound. "Do you belong to the medical corps?" Mother asked him. "No," he answered. "But I studied medicine at Heidelberg until a few months ago." Thanks to the cold, he told the Americans in what sounded like fairly good English, Harry's wound hadn't become infected. "He is suffering from a severe loss of blood," he explained to Mother. "What he needs is rest and nourishment."

Relaxation was now beginning to replace suspicion. Even to me, all the soldiers looked very young as we sat there together. Heinz and Willi, both from Cologne, were 16. The German corporal, at 23, was the oldest of them all. From his food bag he drew out a bottle of red wine, and Heinz managed to find a loaf of rye bread. Mother cut that in small pieces to be served with the dinner; half the wine, however, she put away "for the wounded boy."

Then Mother said grace. I noticed that there were tears in her eyes as she said the old, familiar words, "Komm, Herr Jesus. Be our guest." And as I looked around the table, I saw tears, too, in the eyes of the battle-weary soldiers, boys again, some from America, some from Germany, all far from home.

Just before midnight, Mother went to the doorstep and asked us to join her to look up at the Star of Bethlehem. We all stood beside her except Harry, who was sleeping. For all of us during that moment of silence, looking at the brightest star in the heavens, the war was a distant, almost-forgotten thing.

Our private armistice continued next morning. Harry woke in the early hours, and swallowed some broth that Mother fed him. With the dawn, it was apparent that he was becoming stronger. Mother now made him an invigorating drink from our one egg, the rest of the corporal's wine and some sugar. Everyone else had oatmeal. Afterward, two poles and Mother's best tablecloth were fashioned into a stretcher for Harry.

The corporal then advised the Americans how to find their way back to their lines. Looking over Jim's map, the corporal pointed out a stream. "Continue along this creek," he said, "and you will find the 1st Army rebuilding its forces on its upper course." The medical student relayed the information in English.

"Why don't we head for Monschau?" Jim had the student ask. "Nein!" the corporal exclaimed. "We've retaken Monschau."

Now Mother gave them all back their weapons. "Be careful, boys," she said. "I want you to get home someday where you belong. God bless you all!" The German and American soldiers shook hands, and we watched them disappear in opposite directions.

When I returned inside, Mother had brought out the old family Bible. I glanced over her shoulder. The book was open to the Christmas story, the Birth in the Manger and how the Wise Men came from afar bearing their gifts. Her finger was tracing the last line from Matthew 2:12: "...they departed into their own country another way."



"The W in Christmas"

-author unknown

Each December, I vowed to make Christmas a calm and peaceful experience. But once again, despite my plans, chaos prevailed. I had cut back on nonessential obligations-- extensive card writing, endless baking, decorating, and yes, even the all American pastime, overspending. Yet, still, I found myself exhausted, unable to appreciate the precious family moments, and, of course, the true meaning of Christmas.

My son, Nicholas, was in kindergarten that year. It was an exciting season for a six year old filled with hopes, dreams and laughter. For weeks, he'd been memorizing songs for his school's "Winter Pageant." I didn't have the heart to tell him I'd be working the night of the production.

Unwilling to miss his shining moment, I spoke with his teacher. She assured me there'd be a dress rehearsal the morning of the presentation. All parents unable to attend that evening were welcome to come then. Fortunately, Nicholas seemed happy with the compromise.

So, just as I promised, on the morning of the dress rehearsal, I filed in 10 minutes early, found a spot on the cafeteria floor and sat down. Around the room, I saw several other parents quietly scampering to their seats. As I waited, the students were led into the room. Each class, accompanied by their teacher, sat cross-legged on the floor. Then, each group, one by one, rose to perform their song.

Because the public school system had long stopped referring to the holiday as "Christmas," I didn't expect anything other than fun, commercial entertainment -- songs of reindeer, Santa Claus, snowflakes and good cheer. The melodies were fun, cute and lighthearted, but nowhere to be found was even the hint of an innocent babe, a manger, or Christ's sacred gift of hope and joy. So, when my son's class rose to sing, "Christmas Love", I was slightly taken aback by its bold title.

Nicholas was aglow, as were all of his classmates, adorned in fuzzy mittens, red sweaters and bright snowcaps upon their heads. Those in the front row -- center stage -- held up large letters, one by one, to spell out the title of the song. As the class would sing "C is for Christmas," a child would hold up the letter C. Then, "H is for Happy," and on and on, until each child holding up his portion had presented the complete message, "Christmas Love."

The performance was going smoothly, until suddenly, we noticed her -- a small, quiet girl in the front row who was holding the letter "M" upside down. She was entirely unaware, that reversed, her letter "M" appeared as a "W." Fidgeting from side to side, she soon moved entirely away from her mark.

The audience of 1st through 6th graders snickered at the little one's mistake. But in her innocence, she had no idea they were laughing at her as she stood tall, proudly holding her "W".

One can only imagine the difficulty in calming an audience of young, giggling students. Although many teachers tried to shush the children, the laughter continued until the last letter was raised, and we all saw it together. A hush came over the audience and eyes began to widen.

In that instant, we understood -- the reason we were there, why we celebrated the holiday in the first place, why even in the chaos there was a purpose for our festivities. For when the last letter was held high, the message read loud and clear:

CHRIST WAS LOVE. And I believe He still is.



“The Christmas I Remember Best”

by Lee Wayne Maloy

In the war years, I served my country as a merchant marine. By the time I was 19 years old I had traveled around the world three times, It was a great adventure for a young man, but life as a merchant seaman was very rough, and I had to learn to be tough to survive.

New men went through initiations called "smokers." This is where you either sank or swam as a merchant marine. I found myself in a small boxing ring fighting the toughest man on board. I was knocked down time and time again, but I kept getting up, and each time I pulled myself to my feet, I got a little better and a little more confident.

Though I never knocked the big guy down, I learned one of the best lessons of my life: to never give up and just keep trying.

My efforts proved to be the right thing because everyone came over and patted me on the back and gave me a big hug. Even the biggest and toughest guy on board became a fast friend who always looked after me from then on. These were the men with whom I would share so many amazing experiences. Though many of my memories have become grayed with the passing of the years, there are a few that still stand out as vivid as if they just happened. Let me preface this Christmas experience with the fact that even at my young age, I had faced death before.

There was the time we were in the Indian Ocean on a tanker carrying war supplies to the troops. The year was 1944, and we had all been on alert for the entire week having heard several ships had been sunk by U-boats. The Germans were relentless and usually traveled in "wolf packs," making it most difficult to avoid being torpedoed.

The moon was bright that night, and I could see very clearly. I was on watch on the bow of the ship with binoculars in hand. I surveyed the horizon keeping myself sharp and alert for my task. My older brother was on board with me and was down in the galley having his coffee. I had been on watch for several hours and was getting a little cold and hungry.

The sea was a fluorescent green, which made every white cap and fish glow. As I scanned the horizon I suddenly noticed two fluorescent streaks in the distance. I blinked my eyes just to make sure of what I was seeing. Yes, it was two torpedoes coming straight for the bow of our ship. I quickly grabbed the phone to warn the bridge, but it just rang and rang without anyone answering.

Later they told me they saw the torpedoes as I rang and didn't think we had a chance. I didn't think we had a chance either, but as the ship rose on the swell of the next wave, the torpedo on our starboard side missed us completely. The one on our port side was invisible and I was invisible, and I wrapped my arms tightly around myself and closed my eyes as though I could protect myself from the impending explosion.

I waited frozen in that moment of time with my shipmates as we heard the torpedo skim down the ship, clanging as it went. It banged into us four or five times, and then silence. By some miracle the torpedo's warhead never came in contact with the ship, and we were saved.

Several months later on Christmas Eve, I had just celebrated my 20th birthday on Dec. 21. We were on our way home from the Mediterranean approaching the Straits of Gibraltar on our way to the



North Atlantic. We were happily bound for the East Coast of the good old USA. It was a stormy night that Christmas Eve, and I was once again on watch at the bow of the ship.

The sea was covered in white caps, which make it almost impossible to see "turkey feathers," a term we used to describe the white plume that flows behind a submarine's periscope when it is close to the surface. Understandably all of our thoughts were of home and of Christmas and of hopes of soon being with our families.

The past days had been unremarkable, and the sights, sounds and smell of the ocean lulled me into a sense of well-being. Then it all seemed to happen in an instant. I saw the plume of a periscope appear off the port side of our ship. It couldn't have been more than 100 yards away. I had no chance to ring the bridge this time. They must have seen the periscope at the same time I did because the ship was suddenly alive with alarms and shouts of men scurrying to their battle stations.

But there was no time to ready ourselves for a fight. There was no time to protect ourselves in any way. The submarine was already on us, rising up out of that choppy sea. The enemy had us dead to rights. I'll never forget what happened next.

There was a flashing. Dash dash, dot dot dash dot. I mouthed the letters as I saw the German submarine blinking its Morse code message. I couldn't believe what was I was seeing. M-E-R. Could I be reading it correctly? Another "R" and then, dash dot dash dash, a "Y." It was happening so fast as the second word flashed to us in the darkness. C-H-R-I-S-T-M-A-S. Then it was over. As fast as the U-boat had appeared it sank back into the blackness of the sea and was gone.

We all stood transfixed. No one moved for several seconds as we recovered from our shock and surprise. We had escaped death before by a twist of fate or maybe luck.

But on this Christmas Eve we had been given a gift. As the reality of what had just transpired and the words "Merry Christmas" took hold in our minds and then our hearts, we unitedly sent up a cheer. A cheer of relief, and of joy and true celebration.

I have had many wonderful Christmases since that Christmas Eve in 1944. I was able to marry and spend 56 years with my lovely wife and help to raise our three children.

Each consecutive Christmas has been surrounded by grandchildren and now, great-grandchildren. None of these memories would have ever been possible if it wasn't for that fortuitous night when the "enemy" gave a ship full of men the gift of peace and one of their best Christmas memories possible.



“The Least of These” by Richard M. Siddoway

We were married in August and settled into a small apartment near the University where both of us went to school. We each had a year until graduation and scrimped and struggled through the autumn quarter. Now Christmas was approaching and we have a little money to squander on Christmas gifts. We managed to put aside enough money for winter quarter tuition and books, and that I had taken all we had except for rent, utilities, and food.

We walked through the department store of Salt Lake arm in arm with the confidence of better days ahead. My bride pause before a winter coat, caressing it with her eyes and fingers. Together we looked at the price tag – – \$75. Tuition for the quarter was \$85. We both knew the coat was out of the question. Her old coat, seam-split and stained, would have to do another year. But Christmas is a time for dreaming and hoping, and her gaze lingered long upon the coat.

When I received my paycheck on December 20, we paid what bills we owed and discovered we had \$20 left for Christmas for each other. Together we found a Christmas tree lot where a stack of broken branches lay. For \$.50 they let us fill the trunk of our old car with pine boughs. We drove home and wired them together into the semblance of a Christmas tree. With a borrowed string of lights and some handmade ornaments, we created our first Christmas tree.

We agreed to spend no more than five dollars apiece in shopping for each other. While my wife drove the car to do her shopping, I walked the half dozen blocks to the Grand Central drugstore to see how far I could stretch five dollars. After considerable searching I selected a paperback novel my wife had commented about and a small box of candy. Together they came to \$4.75. As I approached the checkout stand, I was met with a long line of shoppers, each trying to pay as quickly as possible and get on with the bustle of the season. No one was smiling.

I waited perhaps half an hour, and only three people were ahead of me in the line when I became aware that the line had ground to a halt. The clerk was having an animated discussion with an elderly customer. He was tall and thin, with an enormous shock of white hair that had been carefully parted and combed. He was wearing a pair of navy blue slacks that ended nearly 3 inches above his shoes. His plaid shirt was missing a button, and the sleeves of the shirt for 2 to 2 or 3 inches past the sleeves of his light jacket. He had an ancient leather wallet in his hand.

“Sir,” barked the clerk, “the price of insulin has gone up. I’m sorry, but we have no control over that. You need four more dollars.”

“ But it has been the same price ever since my wife started taking it. I have no more money. She needs the medication.” The man’s neck was turning red and he was obviously uncomfortable with the situation. “I must have the insulin. I must.”

The clerk shook her head. “ I’m sorry, sir, but I have no control over the prices. You need four more dollars.”

The woman immediately ahead of me in line began to matter under her breath. She had other purchases to make and resented this clot in the artery of Christmas shopping. “Hurry up, hurry up,” she whispered loudly.

“Please let me take the insulin and I will bring you back the four dollars,” pleaded our elderly friend. The clerk was adamant; he had to pay before he got the medicine.



The man standing behind him put a hand on his shoulder and said, "Come on, pop, you're holding up the line. Pay the lady and let's get on with it."

"I don't have any more money," he replied. As he turned to face the man behind him, I saw his face for the first time. He had an enormous but she white eyebrows that seemed out of place on his emasculated face, but complemented the thin white mustache on his upper lip. "I've been buying insulin here for years. Always it has been the same price. Now it's four dollars more. My wife"—he thee up his hands in despair—"must have it." He turned back to the clerk.

The lady in front of me grew more agitated. That doesn't or so people behind me began creating there next to see what was holding up the line. Suddenly I stepped out of line, reached into my pocket, withdrew my wallet, and handed five dollars to the old man. "Merry Christmas," I said.

He hesitated a moment, then his blue eyes grew moist as he took the money. "God bless you, my son."

I turned and walked back into the store aisles. I counted the money I had remaining in my wallet — four dollars. I replaced the box of candy on the shelf and got back in line to pay for the novel. The line moved slowly, but at last I made my purchase.

Snow is falling and soft white feathery flakes as I walked up the hill toward our apartment. The lights from the city reflected from the clouds above and gave a glow to my surroundings that match the glow I felt inside I turned in our driveway and saw an envelope stuck in our screen door. I removed it and found written on the front of the envelope simply, "Matthew 25:40."

I opened the door, stepped inside, and turned on the light. I ripped open the end of the envelope and withdrew a \$100 bill. There was no other message. With wonder I folded the envelope and stuffed it in my pocket as I heard my wife drive in. She brought in her sack of purchases and shooed me out of our apartment while she did her wrapping.

It was only after I had driven to the department store and purchased the winter coat for my wife that I took time to get out my Bible and read the scripture written on the envelope:

"Verily I sat into you, inasmuch as ye have done it into one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me."

To this day I have no idea who blessed our lives that Christmas.



“Trouble at the Inn”

by Dina Donahue

For many years now, whenever Christmas pageants are talked about in a certain little town in the Mid-west, someone is sure to mention the name of Wallace Purling. Wally’s performance in one annual production of the Nativity play has slipped into the realm of legend. But the old-timers who were in the audience that night never tire of recalling exactly what happened.

Wally was nine that year and in the second grade, though he should have been in the fourth. Most people in town knew that he had difficulty in keeping up. He was big and clumsy, slow in movement and mind. Still, Wally was well liked by the other children in his class, all of whom were smaller than he, though the boys had trouble hiding their irritation when Wally would ask to play ball with them or any game, for that matter, in which winning was important.

Most often they’d find a way to keep him out but Wally would hang around anyway—not sulking, just hoping. He was always a helpful boy, a willing and smiling one, and the natural protector of the underdog. Sometimes if the older boys chased the younger ones away, it would always be Wally who’d say, “Can’t they stay? They’re no bother.”

Wally fancied the idea of being a shepherd with a flute in the Christmas pageant that year, but the play’s director, Miss Lambard, assigned him to a more important role. After all, she reasoned, the Innkeeper did not have too many lines and Wally’s size would make his refusal of lodging to Joseph more forceful.

And so it happened that the usual large, partisan audience gathered for the town’s yearly extravaganza of crooks and creches, of beards, crowns, halos and a whole stageful of squeaky voices. No one on stage or off was more caught up in the magic of the night than Wallace Purling. They said later that he stood in the wings and watched the performance with such fascination that from time to time Miss Lambard had to make sure he did not wander onstage before his cue.

Then the time came when Joseph appeared, slowly, tenderly guiding Mary to the door of the inn. Joseph knocked hard on the wooden door set into the painted backdrop. Wally the Innkeeper was there, waiting.

“What do you want?” Wally said, swinging the door open with a brusque gesture.

“We seek lodging.”

“Seek it elsewhere.” Wally looked straight ahead but spoke vigorously. “The inn is filled.”

“Sir, we have asked everywhere in vain. We have traveled far and are very weary.”



“There is no room in this inn for you.” Wally looked properly stern.

“Please, good innkeeper, this is my wife, Mary. She is heavy with child and needs a place to rest. Surely you must have some small corner for her. She is so tired.”

Now, for the first time, the Innkeeper relaxed his stiff stance and looked down at Mary. With that, there was a long pause, long enough to make the audience a bit tense with embarrassment.

“No! Begone!” the prompter whispered from the wings.

“No!” Wally repeated automatically. “Begone!”

Joseph sadly placed his arm around Mary and Mary laid her head upon her husband’s shoulder and the two of them started to move away. The Innkeeper did not return inside his inn, however. Wally stood there in the doorway, watching the forlorn couple. His mouth was open, his brow creased with concern, his eyes filling unmistakably with tears.

And suddenly this Christmas pageant became different from all the others.

“Don’t go, Joseph,” Wally called out. “Bring Mary back.” And Wallace Purling’s face grew into a bright smile. “You can have MY room.”

Some people in town thought that the pageant had been ruined. Yet there were others—many, many others—who considered it the most Christmas of all Christmas pageants they had ever seen.



“Christmas Day In The Morning”

by Pearl S. Buck

He woke suddenly and completely. It was four o'clock, the hour at which his father had always called him to get up and help with the milking. Strange how the habits of his youth clung to him still! Fifty years ago, and his father had been dead for thirty years, and yet he waked at four o'clock in the morning. He had trained himself to turn over and go to sleep, but this morning it was Christmas, he did not try to sleep.

Why did he feel so awake tonight? He slipped back in time, as he did so easily nowadays. He was fifteen years old and still on his father's farm. He loved his father. He had not known it until one day a few days before Christmas, when he had overheard what his father was saying to his mother.

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

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

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

When he heard these words, something in him spoke: his father loved him! He had never thought of that before, taking for granted the tie of their blood. Neither his father nor his mother talked about loving their children--they had no time for such things. There was always so much to do on the farm.

Now that he knew his father loved him, there would be no loitering in the mornings and having to be called again. He got up after that, stumbling blindly in his sleep, and pulled on his clothes, his eyes shut, but he got up.

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

He wished, that Christmas when he was fifteen, he had a better present for his father. As usual he had gone to the ten-cent store and bought a tie. It had seemed nice enough until he lay thinking the night before Christmas. He looked out of his attic window, the stars were bright.

"Dad," he had once asked when he was a little boy, "What is a stable?"

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



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

The thought struck him like a silver dagger. Why should he not give his father a special gift too, out there in the barn? He could get up early, earlier than four o'clock, and he could creep into the barn and get all the milking done. He'd do it alone, milk and clean up, and then when his father went in to start the milking he'd see it all done. And he would know who had done it. He laughed to himself as he gazed at the stars. It was what he would do, and he musn't sleep too sound.

He must have waked twenty times, scratching a match each time to look at his old watch -- midnight, and half past one, and then two o'clock.

At a quarter to three he got up and put on his clothes. He crept downstairs, careful of the creaky boards, and let himself out. The cows looked at him, sleepy and surprised. It was early for them, too.

He had never milked all alone before, but it seemed almost easy. He kept thinking about his father's surprise. His father would come in and get him, saying that he would get things started while Rob was getting dressed. He'd go to the barn, open the door, and then he'd go get the two big empty milk cans. But they wouldn't be waiting or empty, they'd be standing in the milk-house, filled.

"What the--," he could hear his father exclaiming.

He smiled and milked steadily, two strong streams rushing into the pail, frothing and fragrant.

The task went more easily than he had ever known it to go before. Milking for once was not a chore. It was something else, a gift to his father who loved him. He finished, the two milk cans were full, and he covered them and closed the milk-house door carefully, making sure of the latch.

Back in his room he had only a minute to pull off his clothes in the darkness and jump into bed, for he heard his father up. He put the covers over his head to silence his quick breathing. The door opened.

"Rob!" His father called. "We have to get up, son, even if it is Christmas."

"Aw-right," he said sleepily.

The door closed and he lay still, laughing to himself. In just a few minutes his father would know. His dancing heart was ready to jump from his body.

The minutes were endless -- ten, fifteen, he did not know how many -- and he heard his father's footsteps again. The door opened and he lay still.



"Rob!"

"Yes, Dad--"

His father was laughing, a queer sobbing sort of laugh.

"Thought you'd fool me, did you?" His father was standing by his bed, feeling for him, pulling away the cover.

"It's for Christmas, Dad!"

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

"Son, I thank you. Nobody ever did a nicer thing--"

"Oh, Dad, I want you to know -- I do want to be good!" The words broke from him of their own will. He did not know what to say. His heart was bursting with love.

He got up and pulled on his clothes again and they went down to the Christmas tree. Oh what a Christmas, and how his heart had nearly burst again with shyness and pride as his father told his mother and made the younger children listen about how he, Rob, had got up all by himself.

"The best Christmas gift I ever had, and I'll remember it, son every year on Christmas morning, so long as I live."

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



“Blessings Undending” by Elsie Gillis

It was 1935. The Depression was still taking its toll. My father had been out of work for many, many months, only picking up odds and ends in jobs from time to time. Mother was holding us together financially by working as a chambermaid at the Newhouse Hotel.

Every morning after breakfast and after family prayer, my mother would leave for work, my sister and I for school and Father would take his prearranged route up one side of State Street, down the other side, up the east side of Main Street and down the west side. Many businessmen whom Daddy had come to know well were on the lookout for jobs he could fill.

On this morning, a few days before Christmas, it seemed to me he pleaded with his God in family prayer with added fervor. He asked him to please bless him this day that something would open up so he might provide a Christmas for his family.

Up and down State Street, up Main Street and the greeting was the same. Nothing! Discouraged, he stopped at Weidner's Shoe Repair Shop. This good man always had some hot Postum "on" for Daddy to help warm him up, as the weather was bitter. He also had a two-day job for my father which, of course, raised my father's spirits.

As they sipped their Postum together in the rear of the shop, Mr. Weidner handed Daddy a package. "A goose for your Christmas dinner," he said. "A lady who owed me some money for shoe repair brought it in this morning. I already have a turkey for our dinner so I thought, 'I will give this to Max.' "

Leaving Weidner's Shoe Repair, all the way down Main Street, he walked with a heart full of gratitude and thanksgiving. For the first time he could hear the sound of Christmas in the air and see the beauty of the Christmas season in the shop windows. He was going to take Elsa a goose she could prepare for their Christmas dinner. In his mind he made plans on how he would present this wonderful bird to her. In his mind he could see the expression on her face, and that warmed him, too.

To warm him further, he took his usual journey through the Broadway entrance of Auerbach's department store and out the State Street entrance, cutting off a half block from the cold. As he was making his way through the holiday crowd, he met a German woman from his hometown in Germany. She had recently been left a widow with two children to raise.

Father greeted her, saying "Frhliches Weinachten" (Merry Christmas), and the woman began to cry.

"It will not be a merry Christmas for us. I have only one loaf of bread in my house. That will be our Christmas dinner."

Father held his goose tightly under his arm because something in him was saying, "Give her the goose." And he was arguing back, "But I asked you for a blessing for my family this morning. This goose is your answer. It would bring such happiness to my Elsa and the girls." And he pressed the goose more tightly to him.

"Give her the goose" rang clearly still, and he gave the woman the goose.

Now his spirits sank to the very depths. How could he go home? How could he tell Elsa that he had a goose for them — they deserved it so — and he'd given it away? How could he bear to see



her tears? He did not want to go home. In utter despair he walked the next three blocks to his home oblivious to the cold, oblivious to everything except his sadness.

Mother met him at the door with a broad smile and a pan holding a dressed chicken. A friend from Logan had dropped by only a few minutes earlier with the chicken.

"The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away." At the time he was taking away a goose from Daddy and giving it to this widow whom he'd known in Germany, he was giving us a chicken plus some nuts from a friend.

As though that wasn't miracle enough, my sister, coming home from school that day, was stopped by a man who asked her what she wanted for Christmas. Her answer was: "A pair of anklets and some paper dolls." She wanted the Dionne Quintuplet paper dolls. "Is that all?" the man said to her. "Yes," she said, "because my daddy is out of work." The man handed her a \$5 bill.

On Christmas Eve, at 4 p.m. we went to town with our parents. At Kresses' five-and-dime store, they bought my sister and me each a pair of socks and a paper doll cutout book.

I remember that Christmas of 1935 as one of the most joyous I've ever known.



“Twenty Dollars for a Paper Doll”

by Norman D. Anderson

One Christmas, I was serving as a bishop in a Provo, Utah, ward. Because I had never had much success in selecting and buying clothes for my wife, I had, for the past several years, cut out a paper doll, wrapped a twenty-dollar bill around it like a dress, and hung it on the tree as a special gift for her. In those days, twenty dollars would buy a pretty nice dress.

But because of a tight budget this particular year, I had struggled for weeks to save the twenty dollars to hang on the tree.

The day before Christmas, my plans changed suddenly when a man needing help came by my office. I could not reach my financial clerk to obtain fast offering funds, so I gave the man five of my twenty dollars so he could go home for Christmas. I tucked the remaining fifteen dollars away in my wallet, hoping it would do for a dress.

A few minutes later, a man from my ward came into my office. He said, “Bishop, one of my home teaching families won’t have much for Christmas this year without help. I have fifteen dollars. If I could get a little more from somewhere, I could get a few things for them.”

I knew he needed his money as much as I needed mine, so I handed him my fifteen dollars and said a sad farewell to my wife’s Christmas dress.

My disappointment over the dress lightened when the children finally settled down on Christmas Eve and we had set out their gifts for them. But when my wife went to get ready for bed at midnight, I sat moping in a chair for a few minutes because my traditional gift hadn’t worked out.

Suddenly the thought came to me that I should look in my wallet again. There, where I had taken out the money to give to the home teacher, was fifteen dollars. I looked in another compartment and found another fifteen dollars. In the final compartment there was a twenty-dollar bill—making a total of fifty dollars that had not been there earlier!

I wept in gratitude as I cut out a paper doll and hung it on the tree.



Christmas Devotional Story

by President Monson (2009)

Many years ago I read of an experience at Christmastime which took place when thousands of weary travelers were stranded in the congested Atlanta, Georgia, airport. An ice storm had seriously delayed air travel as these people were trying to get wherever they most wanted to be for Christmas—most likely home.

It happened in December of 1970. As the midnight hour tolled, unhappy passengers clustered around ticket counters, conferring anxiously with agents whose cheerfulness had long since evaporated. They, too, wanted to be home. A few people managed to doze in uncomfortable seats. Others gathered at the newsstands to thumb silently through paperback books.

If there was a common bond among this diverse throng, it was loneliness—pervasive, inescapable, suffocating loneliness. But airport decorum required that each traveler maintain his invisible barrier against all the others. Better to be lonely than to be involved, which inevitably meant listening to the complaints of gloomy and disheartened fellow travelers.

The fact of the matter was that there were more passengers than there were available seats on any of the planes. When an occasional plane managed to break out, more travelers stayed behind than made it aboard. The words “Standby,” “Reservation confirmed,” and “First-class passenger” settled priorities and bespoke money, power, influence, foresight—or the lack thereof.

Gate 67 in Atlanta was a microcosm of the whole cavernous airport. Scarcely more than a glassed-in cubicle, it was jammed with travelers hoping to fly to New Orleans, Dallas, and points west. Except for the fortunate few traveling in pairs, there was little conversation at Gate 67. A salesman stared absently into space, as if resigned. A young mother cradled an infant in her arms, gently rocking in a vain effort to soothe the soft whimpering.

Then there was a man in a finely tailored grey flannel suit who somehow seemed impervious to the collective suffering. There was a certain indifference about his manner. He was absorbed in paperwork—figuring the year-end corporate profits, perhaps. A nerve-frayed traveler sitting nearby, observing this busy man, might have identified him as an Ebenezer Scrooge.

Suddenly, the relative silence was broken by a commotion. A young man in military uniform, no more than 19 years old, was in animated conversation with the desk agent. The boy held a low-priority ticket. He pleaded with the agent to help him get to New Orleans so that he could take the bus to the obscure Louisiana village he called home.

The agent wearily told him the prospects were poor for the next 24 hours, maybe longer. The boy grew frantic. Immediately after Christmas his unit was to be sent to Vietnam—where at that time war was raging—and if he didn't make this flight, he might never again spend Christmas at home. Even the businessman looked up from his cryptic computations to show a guarded interest. The agent clearly was moved, even a bit embarrassed. But he could only offer sympathy—not hope. The boy stood at the departure desk, casting anxious looks around the crowded room as if seeking just one friendly face.

Finally the agent announced that the flight was ready for boarding. The travelers, who had been waiting long hours, heaved themselves up, gathered their belongings, and shuffled down the small



corridor to the waiting aircraft: twenty, thirty, a hundred—until there were no more seats. The agent turned to the frantic young soldier and shrugged.

Inexplicably, the businessman had lingered behind. Now he stepped forward. “I have a confirmed ticket,” he quietly told the agent. “I’d like to give my seat to this young man.” The agent stared incredulously; then he motioned to the soldier. Unable to speak, tears streaming down his face, the boy in olive drab shook hands with the man in the gray flannel suit, who simply murmured, “Good luck. Have a fine Christmas. Good luck.”

As the plane door closed and the engines began their rising whine, the businessman turned away, clutching his briefcase, and trudged toward the all-night restaurant.

No more than a few among the thousands stranded there at the Atlanta airport witnessed the drama at Gate 67. But for those who did, the sullenness, the frustration, the hostility—all dissolved into a glow. That act of love and kindness between strangers had brought the spirit of Christmas into their hearts.

The lights of the departing plane blinked, starlike, as the craft moved off into the darkness. The infant slept silently now in the lap of the young mother. Perhaps another flight would be leaving before many more hours. But those who witnessed the interchange were less impatient. The glow lingered, gently, pervasively, in that small glass and plastic stable at Gate 67.

My brothers and sisters, finding the real joy of the season comes not in the hurrying and the scurrying to get more done or in the purchasing of obligatory gifts. Real joy comes as we show the love and compassion inspired by the Savior of the World, who said, “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these ... ye have done it unto me.”



“Hero at the Grocery Store”

by Stephanie Meyer

Christmas stories happen in the most everyday places. I was part of one not long ago at the grocery store. I hope I never forget it, though the memory is bittersweet.

I had been shopping for almost an hour by the time I got to the checkout lines. My two youngest sons were with me, the four-year-old refusing to hold onto the cart, the two-year-old trying to climb out of the basket and jump down to play with his brother. Both got progressively whinier and louder as I tried to keep them under control, so I was looking for the fastest lane possible. I had two choices. In the first line were three customers, and they all had just a few purchases. In the second line was only one man, a harried young father with his own crying baby, but his cart was overflowing with groceries.

I quickly looked over the three-person line again. The woman in the front was very elderly, white haired and rail thin, and her hands were shaking as she tried unsuccessfully to unlatch her big purse. In the other line, the young father was throwing his food onto the conveyor belt with superhuman speed. I got in line behind him.

It was the right choice. I was able to start unloading my groceries before the elderly woman was even finished paying. My four-year-old was pulling candy from the shelf, and my little one was trying to help by lobbing cans of soup at me. I felt I couldn't get out of the store fast enough.

And then, over the sound of the store's cheery holiday music, I heard the checker in the other line talking loudly, too loudly. I glanced over as my hands kept working.

“No, I'm sorry,” the checker was almost shouting at the old woman, who didn't seem to understand. “That card won't work. You are past your limit. Do you have another way to pay?” The tiny old woman blinked at the checker with a confused expression. Not only were her hands shaking now, but her shoulders too. The teenage bagger rolled her eyes and sighed.

As I caught a soup can just before it hit my face, I thought to myself: “Boy, did I choose the right line! Those three are going to be there forever.” My mood was positively smug as my checker began scanning my food.

But the smiling woman directly in line behind the elderly lady had a different reaction. Quietly, with no fanfare, she moved to the older woman's side and ran her own credit card through the reader.

“Merry Christmas,” she said softly, still smiling.

And then everyone was quiet. Even my rowdy children paused, feeling the change in the atmosphere.

It took a minute for the older woman to understand what had happened. The checker, her face thoughtful, hesitated with the receipt in her hand, not sure whom to give it to. The smiling woman took it and tucked it into the elderly woman's bag.

“I can't accept ...” the older woman began to protest, with tears forming in her eyes.

The smiling woman interrupted her. “I can afford to do it. What I can't afford is not to do it.”



“Let me help you out,” the suddenly respectful bagger insisted, taking the basket and also taking the old woman’s arm, the way she might have helped her own grandmother.

I watched the checker in my line pause before she pressed the total key to dab at the corner of her eyes with a tissue.

Paying for my groceries and gathering my children, I made it out of the store before the smiling woman. I had made the right choice of lanes, it seemed.

But as I walked out into the bright December sunshine, I was not thinking about my luck but about what I could not afford.

I could not afford my current, self-absorbed frame of mind.

I could not afford to have my children learn lessons of compassion only from strangers.

I could not afford to be so distant from the spirit of Christ at any time of the year—especially during this great season of giving.

I could not afford to let another stranger, another brother or sister, cross my path in need of help without doing something about it.

And that is why I hope never to forget the Christmas hero in the grocery store. The next time I have a chance to be that kind of a hero, I can’t afford to miss it.



“An Exchange of Gifts”

by Diane Rayner

“Those who bring sunshine to the lives of others cannot keep it from themselves.”

-Sir James Matthew Barrie

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

One night shortly before Christmas, when my hands were deep in dough, shaping tiny nutlike Danish cookies heavily spiced with cinnamon, Marty came to me and said in a tone mixed with pleasure and



pride, “Mom, I’ve bought Kenny a Christmas present. Want to see it?” So that’s what he’s been up to, I said to myself. “It’s something he’s wanted for a long, long time, Mom.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

But I was wrong.

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

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

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

So you see, strange and wonderful things still happen on the night of our Lord's birth. And one does not have to have a clear night, either, to follow a fabulous star.



“In One Blinding Moment”

by Max Ellerbusch

It was a busy Friday, six days before Christmas. I was in my instrument repair shop, working feverishly so that I could have all of the Christmas holiday at home with my family. Then the phone rang and a voice was saying that our five-year-old Craig had been hit by a car.

There was a crowd standing around him by the time I got there, but they stepped back for me. Craig was lying in the middle of the road; his curly blond hair was not even ruffled.

He died at Children’s Hospital that afternoon.

There were many witnesses. It had happened at the school crossing. They told us that Craig had waited on the curb until the safety-patrol boy signaled him to cross. Craig, how well you remembered! How often your mother called after you as you started off for kindergarten, “Don’t cross until you get the signal!” You didn’t forget!

The signal came, Craig stepped into the street. The car came so fast no one had seen it. The patrol boy shouted, waved, had to jump for his own life. The car never stopped.

Grace and I drove home from the hospital through the Christmas-lighted streets, not believing what had happened to us. It wasn’t until the night, passing the unused bed, that I knew. Suddenly I was crying, not just for that empty bed but for the emptiness, the seeming senselessness of it. All night long, with Grace awake beside me, I searched what I knew of life for some hint of a loving God at work in it, and found none.

As a child I certainly had been led to expect none. My father used to say that in all his childhood he did not experience one act of charity or Christian kindness. Father was an orphan, growing up in 19th-century Germany, a supposedly Christian land. Orphans were rented out to farmers as machines are rented today, and treated with far less consideration. He grew into a stern, brooding man who looked upon life as an unassisted journey to the grave.

He married another orphan and, as their own children started to come, they decided to emigrate to America. Father got a job aboard a ship; in New York harbor he went ashore and simply kept going. He stopped in Cincinnati where so many Germans were then settling. He took every job he could find, and in a year and a half had saved enough money to send for his family.

On the boat coming over, two of my sisters contracted scarlet fever; they died on Ellis Island. Something in Mother died with them, for from that day on she showed no affection for any living being. I grew up in a silent house, without laughter, without faith.

Later, in my own married life, I was determined not to allow these grim shadows to fall on our own children. Grace and I had four: Diane, Michael, Craig, and Ruth Carol. It was Craig, even more than the others, who seemed to lay low my childhood pessimism, to tell me that the world was a wonderful purposeful place. As a baby he would smile so delightedly at everyone he saw that there was always a little group around his carriage. When we went visiting it was Craig, three years old, who would run to the hostess to say, “You have a lovely house!” If he received a gift he was touched to tears, and then gave it away to the first child who envied it. Sunday morning when Grace dressed to sing in the choir, it was Craig who never forgot to say, “You’re beautiful.”



And if such a child can die, I thought as I struggled, lying in my bed that Friday night, if such a life can be snuffed out in a minute, then life is meaningless and faith in God is self-delusion. By morning my hopelessness and helplessness had found a target, a blinding hatred for the person who had done this to us. That morning police picked him up in Tennessee: George Williams. Fifteen years old.

He came from a broken home, police learned. His mother worked a night shift and slept during the day. Friday he had cut school, taken her car keys while she was asleep, sped down a street. ... All my rage at a senseless universe seemed to focus on the name George Williams. I phoned our lawyer and begged him to prosecute Williams to the limit. "Get him tried as an adult. Juvenile court's not tough enough."

So this was my frame of mind when the thing occurred which changed my life. I cannot explain it; I can only describe it.

It happened in the space of time that it takes to walk two steps. It was late Saturday night. I was pacing the hall outside our bedroom, my head in my hands. I felt sick and dizzy, and tired, so tired. "Oh God," I prayed, "show me why!"

Right then, between that step and the next, my life was changed. The breath went out of me in a great sigh—and with it all my sickness. In its place was a feeling of love and joy so strong it was almost pain.

Other men have called it the "the presence of Christ." I'd known the phrase, of course, but I'd thought it was some abstract, theological idea. I never dreamed it was Someone, an actual Person, filling that narrow hall with love.

It was the suddenness of it that dazed me. It was like a lightning stroke that turned out to be the dawn. I stood blinking in an unfamiliar light. Vengefulness, grief, hate, anger—it was not that I struggled to be rid of them—like goblins imagined in the dark, in the morning's light they simply were not there.

And all the while I had the extraordinary feeling that I was two people. I had another self, a self that was millions of miles from that hall, learning things men don't yet have words to express. I have tried so often to remember the things I knew then, but the learning seemed to take place in a mind apart from the one I ordinarily think with, as though the answer to my question was too vast for my small intellect. But, in that mind beyond logic, that question was answered. In that instant I knew why Craig had to leave us. Though I had no visual sensation, I knew afterward that I had met him, and he was wiser than I, so that I was the little boy and he the man. And he was so busy. Craig has so much to do, unimaginably important things into which I must not inquire. My concerns were still on earth.

In the clarity of the moment, it came to me: This life is a simple thing! I remember the very words in which the thought came. "Life is a grade in school. In this grade we must learn only one lesson: We must establish relationships of love."

Oh, Craig, I thought. Little Craig, in your five short years how fast you learned, how quickly you progressed, how soon you graduated!



I don't know how long I stood there in the hall. Perhaps it was no time at all as we ordinarily measure things. Grace was sitting up in bed when I reached the door of our room. Not reading, not doing anything, just looking straight ahead of her as she had much of the time since Friday afternoon.

Even my appearance must have changed, because as she turned her eyes slowly to me she gave a little gasp and sat up straighter. I started to talk, words tumbling over each other, laughing, eager, trying to say that the world was not an accident, that life meant something, that earthly tragedy was not the end, that all around our incompleteness was a universe of purpose, that the purpose was good beyond our furthest hopes.

"Tonight," I told her, "Craig is beyond needing us. Someone else needs us. George Williams. It's almost Christmas. Maybe, at the Juvenile Detention Home, there'll be no Christmas gift for him unless we send it."

Grace listened, silent, unmoving, staring at me. Suddenly she burst into tears.

"Yes," she said. "That's right, that's right. It's the first thing that's been right since Craig died."

And it has been right. George turned out to be an intelligent, confused, desperately lonely boy, needing a father as much as I needed a son. He got his gift, Christmas Day, and his mother got a box of Grace's good Christmas cookies. We asked for and got his release, a few days later, and this house became his second home. He works with me in the shop after school, joins us for meals around the kitchen table, is a big brother for Diane and Michael and Ruth Carol.

But more was changed, in that moment when I met Christ, than just my feeling about George. That meeting has affected every phase of my life, my approach to business, to friends, to strangers. I don't mean I've been able to sustain the ecstasy of that moment; I doubt that the human body could contain such a joy for very many days.

But I know with the infinite sureness that no matter what life does to us in the future, I will never again touch the rock bottom of despair. No matter how ultimate the blow seems, I glimpsed an even more ultimate joy that blinding moment when the door swung wide.

