

HIS BANNER OVER ME

by

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CHAPTER EIGHT

CHRISTMAS

THE JOYFUL DELIRIUM that was Christmas! I put down my pen and relive those precious memories. Christmas began as soon as Thanksgiving was over. We children had saved all year from our allowance of five cents a week. But even so, there was little money to spend.

We made out our lists, and then put our wits to work. There were the piece bags, three of them. One contained scraps of wool material; another, light summery cottons and lace. The third (O lovely!) had fascinating colorful bits, quite small, of silk and velvet. From these were contrived pen wipers, table mats, ornaments, holders, bags for various purposes.

The greatest thrill was our mother. Oh, the things she invented while we watched breathless as her skillful fingers cut and trimmed and sewed! One year she made boxes of different kinds. I still have the collar box she made for my father. It was voted the masterpiece of them all. Merely a cut down tomato can, covered with golden brown velvet and lined with yellow silk, with a removable yellow silk pad. The round end of the box, which had been carefully removed with the can opener, was also padded and covered and it even had a yellow silk button on it. Father was delighted into transports by it.

Of course we did not see what our mother was making for us. I still have the gift she made for me—she had transformed a lunch box with quilted pink silk lining, into a handkerchief box!

I should imagine that three or four dollars covered the cost of the gifts our parents bought for us.

A week before Christmas we went with Father to the nearby woods and chose the loveliest tree we could find. We usually had to choose it by lantern light; and we children held the lantern while Father chopped it down. Only after the tree was set up in the living room did we really believe that Christmas was coming.

We strung long white strings of popcorn, and made various colored chains of paper. Each year we went downtown to see the stores and every Christmas we added one store trimming to our collection of ornaments. We always hung an angel and a blue star on the tip-most branch. Our parents bought the candles so we did not have to deplete our funds.

The house began to smell woody for we had brought in fir and cedar boughs, tacking them wherever they seemed best. Mince pies and plum pudding aromas drove us nearly frantic.

We did not hang up our stockings but each chose a chair; and before we went to bed we girls brought out our gifts and placed them where they belonged.

At family prayers Mother always read the Christmas story from Luke. It seemed impossible to go to bed and not listen to Father and Mother moving around in the living room, stealthily opening dresser drawers, crackling paper and whispering.

Somehow we did go to sleep, though, after quietness came to the house. Then magically, it was morning. Or almost morning—of course we could not be expected to wait until daylight on Christmas morning. Each called “Merry Christmas,” then Father slipped out and lighted the match to the fires he had laid the night before so no time would be wasted. It is strange but I do not recall ever dressing on Christmas morning. I know we must have; we would have been too cold otherwise. And we did not wear bathrobes because we did not possess any.

But at last we were all in the living room and the lamp with the China shade and the pink base was doing its best to light up all the dark corners of the room. We never touched a thing until Mother was in the room too, for there was no thrill unless she shared it. Then we dived into our things. Simple little gifts which bring the tears to my eyes as I remember . . . many of them the work of Mother’s pricked fingers.

Under the tree was always a dish of homemade candy, another of mixed nuts and one orange apiece. After the first transports of joy had subsided, we children took time to look over each other’s gifts—and there was more exclaiming, more joy. My mother must have been well repaid for her long hours of work as she looked into our happy faces.

Breakfast followed. It was a little extra: we had chocolate instead of plain cocoa. The fragrant oranges, of course, were not eaten but were kept for days to gloat over and then to eat slowly, a section at a time, savoring each mouthful. It always seemed so hard to comb my long, heavy hair on Christmas Day. I wanted to give it a lick and a promise, but my mother knew if there were tangles deep in my mop.

We were all slightly dizzy from excitement but we calmed down after a while, washed the dishes and set about the business of getting dinner. Sometimes we had guests, but usually, while we were young, only ourselves. After the other uncle and family came from Nebraska and there were three families, then indeed was revelry. For dinner we always had roast chicken, one or two of our plump good Plymouth Rock hens. We never bought a turkey.

The long magic day passed, each moment joy-filled. I don’t know how the others felt but there was always a singing in my own heart because this was the birthday of Jesus, the anniversary of the day God came down to earth to dwell among men. I do not want to give the impression that I was a pious or good child: I was not, but I did hold to my heart that blessed truth of the incarnation.

On Christmas night we lighted the candles on the tree and “spoke pieces,” interrupted at frequent intervals by the excitement of extinguishing the blaze when the green needles or the paper chains caught fire. This happened so frequently that my adult conclusion is that we were under the personal protection of a battalion of angels each Christmas night. All the bits of melted wax were carefully salvaged for future use. As sculptors we modeled all sorts of fascinating little figures.

After prayers, our weary heads were glad enough to be laid upon our pillows. How precious and profound the memories of those days. Sweet simple Christmas Day of long ago, when hearts in humble houses drew closer together; and together were they lifted up to God. How good if all the cities and hamlets of America on Christmas Day were like this one!

~ end of chapter 8 ~

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