



Christmas Stories

from the

South's Best Writers



Edited by Charline R. McCord
and Judy H. Tucker

Foreword by
Elizabeth Spencer

Illustrated by
Rick Anderson



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FOREWORD

Carrollton Christmas in Olden Days

Just when I as a child started thinking about Christmas each year, I can't say precisely, but soon after Thanksgiving, I would guess. It was a magical thought. I awaited the miracle with certainty, for the miracle would certainly come. I was a believer. I believed in everything: Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny went right along with the Apostles Creed and might as well have been included in it, though being Presbyterian we didn't often repeat the creed. Also, I once caught my mother dyeing Easter eggs and lost the bunny early on.

I was very easily scared. Thinking of Santa, I began to wonder if I would hear the reindeer hooves on the roof. It made me tremble to think that.

Each year my brother and I were sent out into the wooded pasture back of our house to pick out a Christmas tree. We would find a small cedar, with evenly grown branches, and tie a string around it for the handyman to come and cut it down. Brought in the house,

set up as usual in the corner of the wide hallway, it looked a lot bigger, waiting for its trim. This was before the time of electric lights strung together and plugged in. The candles were wax, rather like those for birthday cake, and were set in small metal holders, each to be clamped to a tree branch. Then ropes of tinsel were swirled among the branches. We had a star! It was painted aluminum and glittered, and somebody got up on a ladder and fastened it to the very top branch. So there was the Bible story, all mixed in.

My mother kept an old sheet to spread around the base of the tree. There was something called “artificial snow,” cotton with shiny flakes, to be scattered around, all ready for the presents to come and lie waiting, while we felt through the paper wrappings and tried to guess, though told not to.

But preparations at the house were small compared to those at the church. Every year my mother was in charge of the Christmas pageant. The Presbyterian pageant was the famous one, and the whole town would turn out for it. Many were actually in it.

We rehearsed every afternoon. The choir, the Bible readings, the setting made to look like a barn with piles of hay and stalls for cows and donkeys, and of course the manger, holding straw piled over a flashlight. Some pretty young woman from the church would be robed in blue to sit by the manger and wait for shepherds and wise men. They would come down the aisles in different lots, while music about them was lustily sung. The choir, far to the

right of the scene, was hidden by draperies made of blankets and green boughs and plants. The best singers in town came to swell the music. The small space grew crowded, and once somebody fell out of the choir. It was later said that he was drunk.

I was usually an angel. My wings were attached by wire made from coat hangers. I wore a head band of tinsel, which scratched, and a white robe made from a sheet. Later when I grew several inches taller I was cast as a shepherd and wore a dingy bathrobe fastened with safety pins and carried a crook.

On Christmas Eve the church flamed with light. Presbyterian churches are usually plain. We had one or two stained-glass windows, mostly to commemorate former members who had died, but the lights provided on those evenings were centered around the stage. Where they were set up elsewhere I can't remember, only the impression of many lights. We had a small pump organ. The church was full. It was probably quite cold. No snow.

Two of my mother's elder brothers had gone into military service and so had been stationed in far-off places like China and the Philippines and had brought back as family gifts certain bronze table ornaments. These could be easily converted into vessels for gold, frankincense, and myrrh. I believe she found some way to light something like incense in one of these, but Presbyterians are not equipped with censers; we had swept all that out with the papacy. Yet I do think she managed it, along with so much else.

Oh, the music! It commenced softly from the organ before the singing, while everybody was settling into seats and getting quiet. Then, all of a sudden, we were the faithful, invited to come, joyful and triumphant. We were in Bethlehem! Somebody now began reading from the Bible, and the old story came alive again. Shepherds were coming in with one or two kids on all fours, covered with what looked like sheepskin. A big angel (my brother) appeared before them, waving a cardboard horn painted silver. Next all the little angels crowded 'round. Now, the lights were on Mary and her manger with the flashlight glowing under the straw.

The three kings were lined up outside in the vestibule and marched down the aisle to their special song. You could see their pants legs with cuffs sticking out beneath their robes, and you could recognize the good everyday faces of Sanders and Hansborough and Bennet fathers from under their cardboard crowns. But tonight they were kings from the Orient, bearing gifts.

The glowing evening was finally over. Whoever had fallen out of the choir had long been reinstated to sing "Silent Night" with all the rest.

My mother in utter exhaustion must have thanked the Lord that it all had gone off well for yet another year. When we reached home she went right to bed.

As for me, all this time, since right after Thanksgiving, I had been busy praying. I very much wanted a baby brother and thought if I asked God every night He would hear me and give me one. I

specified: Let him be born on Christmas Day. My reasons for this desire were, I think, mainly centered in the brother I had. He was seven when I was born and must have thought some malevolent fate had wished this worrisome creature into his favored, pampered life. He had to share! He had to be nice! He had, at the very least, to put up with me! My prayers may have been heard but were not answered. God had put in place other arrangements for acquiring baby brothers.

On Christmas morning, waking was done to shouts of “Christmas gift!” The belief was that if you said it before the other person, he or she would owe you a gift. This foolishness went on through breakfast, every time anybody trailed into sight. But then, the tree. Gifts had by now accumulated to a good height on that snow-covered sheet. Somebody struck a match and lighted all the little candles while my mother hoped the house wouldn’t catch fire. We called in the cook (Laura) and the handyman (Bill) and my father’s foreman (Charles), all of whom had presents waiting. There followed a great swishing of paper, cries of delight—“Just what I wanted!” “How did you know!” “Just look!” “Oh, goody!”

In speaking of prayers for a baby brother, I now wonder what gift I might have prayed to have for Christmas. The truth is, I don’t remember. My parents were generous to a fault; we had only to wish once, out loud, and they would remember and try to satisfy. I think once I got a bicycle, which I loved, rode, and fell off of regularly for years.

The other unanswered prayer was for snow. It seldom, if ever, came.

I stacked my presents carefully and took them to my room.

What else to tell? Christmas dinner? Yes, of course! Turkey, rice and gravy, candied sweet potatoes with marshmallows, English peas, some sort of salad—altogether more than any one human could get down. Ambrosia! My mother made it from fresh cocoanut broken open outdoors with a hatchet, drained, and grated, with fresh oranges, a cherry or two, and what else I forget, though certainly fruit cake.

Filled and groaning, some would go take naps. But some, I remember, on one warm Christmas afternoon went out into the yard and played ball with Bob, our collie dog. My brother or one of the cousins, who might have wandered by, would fling a tennis ball over the house. The house was one story, but the roof was high. Bob would be on the far side. He would catch the ball and come tearing around the corner with it. The game was now to catch Bob, who would pretend to be racing away with it, dodging and circling, but finally letting go, only to race back around the house, and the game would start again. It was such a warm day that the boys were sweating in rolled-up sleeves.

But that very Christmas night the wind groaned and rose. Freezing air swept in from the north, down the great continental basin of the Mississippi River, straight for us, way down in Carrollton. The thermometer went plunging into the 20s. Would the pipes burst, would we have no water?

Christmas was over, for another year.

In recalling these memories, some glow more than others. But one of them, living on, is my love of Christmas carols. Each time I hear “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” I think of Carrollton and of little towns all over the world on Christmas Eve, and invariably I burst into tears.

Elizabeth Spencer

INTRODUCTION

What if there was no Christmas? No Christ in our lives? No fir tree trimmed to the max, no brightly wrapped packages, no gathering and giving, no gifts? What if there were no families feasting, no faith or forgiveness? What if there was no Bible? What if there were no books?

You can rest assured, we'd keep the stories alive, but we might not celebrate Christmas the same way, in all its meanings—both holy and secular—without the printed word. We'd tell and retell its story, as we do among family and friends gathered around the fireside, but a book that preserves the story—there is no substitution for a book.

There's a reason the invention of the Gutenberg press is considered one of the major events of history. The primitive instrument, fashioned after a wine press, could print about three hundred pages a day. The Gutenberg Bible is considered one of the most magnificent examples of the art of printing—yes, the *art* of printing.

Without the book, we probably would not have the good fortune to experience “The Christmas Monkey,” Glen Allison's memorable

story about three children making a magical Christmas out of heartbreak. We would not feel the cold and loneliness of “Christmas 1910” on a snowy Midwestern plain as only Robert Olen Butler can describe it. Can such a stark environment sustain tenderness, hope, and even love? In the skillful hands of Butler all things are possible.

Margaret McMullan would not be at the fireside with us to tell about a good-hearted handyman who hung “The Swing” and helped a lonely rich kid have “the best Christmas ever.” We probably would not have the good fortune to share an evening with Suzanne Hudson and hear her story of a family shattered by tragedy, who with courage, and love, put it back together again.

We would miss the insightful story of a boy named “Luke” and an early morning hunting trip that Sheryl Cornett invites us on. Through her words, you can feel the moisture in the cold, icy morning air, see the bright stars gleaming in the night sky, anticipate the crackle of dried leaves underfoot, and maybe even pick up a whiff of wood smoke in the air. You can taste the sausage biscuits eaten in the cab of the truck and feel a tug at your heart as the man and the boy slowly begin to trust one another.

Only written words can do justice to the delicacy of Mary Ward Brown’s description of “The Amaryllis.” The life cycle of an amaryllis has lessons to teach, and Judge Manderville is an astute pupil. As the flower unfolds its beautiful petals, the judge’s tight, lonely world expands. Yes, without the printed word, we would probably never meet Kay Sloan and hear her expansive tale of sly, knowing humor about aliens visiting the Gulf Coast and saving a marriage in “Occasion for Repentance.”

What a shame it would be if we missed the telling of Mark Richard's "The Birds for Christmas." This is a tough story of boys in an orphanage facing a stark Christmas, but it is infused with humor and great charity. Without this book, we would never meet a lonely girl named Lavender Blue, a character Jacqueline Wheelock has drawn to perfection in "Blue's Christmas." Blue will delight you and surprise you. And remind you that miracles do still happen.

As much as we'd like, we'd probably not have Ruth Campbell Williams at the Christmas dinner table to tell the insightful story of "Queen Elizabeth Running Free." It's all about a strong woman claiming her strength and her future. Nor would we have the opportunity of sitting spellbound as Olympia Vernon weaves the mystical tale of "The Cold Giraffe." Vernon is a fresh, new face on the literary landscape, and she will be heard from again.

We live in a time of hurry and scurry, hustle and bustle. A time when cars are too slow, red lights are too long, and breakfast, lunch and dinner happen in the car while zipping from point A to point B. Reading is often relegated to down time, something we do while trapped in the doctor's waiting room, stuck in an airport terminal gate, or reclining at home in our sickbed. Many of us are watching in silent and helpless disbelief as time-honored newspapers across this country are dying a slow and painful death because the camera and the computer are faster and sexier than the printing press. Yet we remain a people of the printed word; we value the written record and cherish the legacy of stories. Imagine not being able to pen a Christmas letter to that special soldier in Iraq, to send your own Christmas story of hope from the relative safety of this

country into the heart of darkness, chaos, and war. Words matter, stories matter, and books matter.

So, let's sing the old familiar carols, celebrate Christmas with church and family, and make a toast to the printing press, the book, and most of all the scribes who write them and the readers who take them into their hurried lives. There's an old saying: I am a part of all I have met. At the risk of being presumptuous, we would like to add a second chorus: All I have read is always a part of me. May we all give and receive good words, good stories, and good books this holiday season!

Merry Christmas to you all!

Charline R. McCord and Judy H. Tucker