

A CHILD'S CHRISTMAS IN UTAH*

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A WORD ABOUT THE STORY

Several years ago some Carleton students planning a Christmas banquet asked me if I would be on the program and give a talk about my "experience with Christmas." I was having one of my spasmodic periods of purity and refusing to give talks or lectures on the grounds that I did not possess enough truth to make a speech last more than a few seconds. It is not of such brief impeccable mutterings that lectureships or programs are filled. But the phrase "your experience with Christmas" stayed with me. It suggested dangerous and exotic adventures I had lived through, or, perhaps, a disease that by taking thought and pills I had overcome. Christmas was upon us, I was far from the Utah mountains, it suddenly came to me that I had had experiences with Christmas that I would never have again, though whether dangerous or exotic was not for me to say. I sent the students a note saying I would not give a talk but would try to write something.

The afternoon of the banquet, in that unsettling lull between stacks of themes, I wrote "A Child's Christmas in Utah." I have tinkered with it since, but not much. Not enough, perhaps.

I think I have to say that the story is fiction but I hope true in the way fiction is true, not literally but emotionally true, true to the feel of a time and an experience. This is my "experience of Christmas" as I have tried to put it back together after many years. I would let the Psalmist (slightly abridged) state my further intention: "These things I remember, and pour out my soul within me . . . with the voice of joy and praise."

That voice is out of fashion now, but it was in me when I wrote the story. I cannot know if it will speak through the story to you. But Christmas is a good time to hope for all things, great and small. My small hope is that the voice is there.

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It isn't that way now. The quiet fields are broken into building lots and the farmers build jet engines in the city and garden with a roto-tiller after work. The old canal is lined with concrete and in the center of the town the Saturday-and-sun-drenched baseball diamond has shrunk to softball under lights, and the county has built a tennis court just off third base for a game the kids are beginning to learn to play in white shoes.

The frame store with the pot-bellied stove smelling of sizzled tobacco spit and with the mash sacks and rummy dive in back is a supermarket now where wives in stretch-pants buy hamburger helper and frozen chopped broccoli by the ton and aerosol bombs that go "SwwOOOOOsh" and keep off the bugs or put on your pie a glob of something white that keeps your arteries open.

It isn't the way it used to be in my Plain City time — of plowing, planting, watering, hoeing, furrowing, harvesting, and throwing the harvest in the river to be pickled in the Great Salt Lake. It is the affluent society now, of rocket plants and loan companies, and the ice cream cones come frozen in glazed wrapping and taste like the strips of brown paper we used to put under our upper lip to stop the nosebleed. And I have not been back for Christmas for many and many a year — to the long everyday stocking with a fifty cent piece squaring the toe, the large orange pressing the half dollar down — a thick, loose-skinned orange that peeled clean and dry — to the heaped snow that fell on every Christmas eve — I have not been back, and it isn't that way now — and all I can do is gather a crystal or two from a vein of quartz — or is it fools-gold? — in Time.

* * *

In the bed-covering warmth of the high ceilinged room in the weather-bent old house between the mountains and the salt lake, nothing was alive at first except the dry flopping of the harness straps against the horse's matted coat and the cold jangle of the chains against the single-tree of the go-devil that Dad used to clear the paths between the house and the barn, the barn and the chicken coop, the chicken coop and the house, and to gouge a trail down the drifted lane to the county road where the snowplows from the shops in Ogden would come later in the day. Lying in the dark that is beginning to thin out like spilled ink, we hear coming through the window the flopping and the jangling and the sliding rumble of the triangular runners as they push aside rocks and twigs and skid down the sides of irrigation ditches, and the tongue clicking and "steady, boy, steady," of Dad as he talks to the horse. Hearing this, and seeing from under the door the orange line of kitchen light and, without listening for it, hearing the first snapping of the kindling in the range and smelling, without sniffing for it, the sulphurousness of coal smoke, we know — all three of us — that we have been tricked again, like last year and the year before that, that we had tricked ourselves and somehow, we can't say how, had fallen asleep — sometime, somewhere — back in that black night and that Christmas had come again and caught us sleeping.

Then the tinny, abrupt jingle of loose bedsprings, the cold shock beneath the warm flannel pajama legs, the cold fluttering linoleum slap against the feet; and the orange line beneath the door flashes upward and out: we are across the kitchen, through the heavy coal smoke to where the living room door is barred, sealed, against us, as Mother, at the side door, calls outside, and Dad comes in.

Daylight comes with the smell of oranges, pine needles, and chocolate; and coal smoke from the heater, and the brittle crack of hazel nuts and the tearing raveling crunch of peanut shells, the crackle of tissue paper crushing, the sweet sticky slurp of cherry chocolates, and the crack and shatter of peanut brittle. Amidst the smell, above the sounds, comes the "Oh, just what I wanted," of Mother and the "Very nice, very fine," of Dad and the "One-two-three-four! I got *four* presents that's simply more than *anybody*," of Mary and the "This wheel's just fine 'cause it's got a burr on the axle, not a cotter key," of Nephi, and the "Billy's got this book, he'll not swap. I'll swap with Rex," of another.

By mid-morning the broad valley glistens under the cold sun, and you have gone alone through the fields in the over-the-boots snow and along the row of willows beside the canal and watched the muskrats swimming in the alley of dark water between the frozen banks, have seen the runic tracings of the quail and pheasant trails and shaken the loose snow away from your collar that a magpie knocked down on you as you passed beneath the cottonwood tree to Rex's place where you ate molasses candy, swapped the extra *Bomba* you had read for the *Army Boys in France* that you had not. By noon you have been to Bill's through the glare of the sun and snow and shown him your hi-tops with the long grey woolen socks and the fold-over edge of red at the top and eaten peanut brittle, been to Grant's and seen the new skates, shown-off the cream and green cover of your *Pluck and Luck* and eaten hard tacks, been along the roads, the ditches, the trails until the snow packed into ice inside your boots has sent you home to dry and then, drying, behind the big heater in the living room to sail on the stack of books to all the great green world that never was and will always be, for nothing can touch it, ever. Nothing.

The crunch and ravel and tinkle is gone from the room now. The quiet is there like a field rippled with snow until the others return from their rounds, and in from the kitchen come only the first rasps and scrapes and clicks and hacks of dinner's getting underway. Behind the stove there is pine tree and warmth and the smell of chocolate syrup, and *Bomba* the Jungle Boy crouches in the grass beside the trail as the enemy patrol with poisoned darts in their quivers and blow guns in their hands file slowly by and disappear into the tangled heat of the jungle. In the gassy, coal-smelling clearing *Bomba* is wiping into glittering brightness the still smouldering and dripping blade when, bursting through the steaming wall of branches and vines, comes Aunt Em's bellow of tribal greeting, followed by a safari of cousins and a diminutive uncle, bearing weapons and supplies in their careful intimidated, and love-filled hands.

"Good Lord, Louisa, there you are just as I figured, sweating out in the kitchen while everybody else has a fine faretheewell. We're late but I been after Ephraim since daybreak to get them cows milked so's we could get on our way. By Judas Priest, you would thought the man had never milked a cow before. Biggest kid in the house on Christmas. I get more work out of the cat than I do him. Lard amighty! You ought to see that house. You can't see out the windows for trash, and I'm so flustered I think I sliced an egg on the jello and a banana on the hot potato salad. I'm afraid to look, I tell you. And Moroni? — he was out chasing the girls until he ought to have been home milking, too; and, Lard, Sara and Nell, you'd of thought they never been given anything before. And all the time, Eph draggin' along, them cows moanin' out in the barn, their bags so full they'd liked t'have died, nothing to eat — it's a good

thing for that, I suppose. Why, he didn't get out of the house until ten o'clock, the milk man had come and gone by two hours and all the time me trying' to bake a cake in a crooked oven with the coal Wilbur Mann sold us at a special and, Louisa, I'm tellin' you it ain't coal at all. It's just dirt. It's better dirt than half that hard scabble your man's farming down there in Salt Creek, and if Wilbur can sell that sandy loam he sold me for coal, I'd say Josiah's got a fortune in fuel under that field of onions he tries to grow ever summer. Grow! I's by there t'other day lookin' for the horses before the shurf stray-penned 'em and I says to Eph, 'Josiah's got a nice five acres of picklin' onions out a that salt flat he's tryin' to farm. Ought to get a special price, seein's how they been pickled all summer in brine automatic.' Well, as I'm sayin', there I am tryin' to bake this cake, and roast a shoulder of pork and fix the salad and I'm up to my chin in candy and nuts and wrappin' paper until I finally just booted everybody out the back door and said, 'Lardy, go on over t'the neighbors and dirty up some fresh territory while I get something done.' So they did. Except Eph. He's still settin' there in his new robe and slippers, dozin' mind you, his head bobbin' back and forth like a derrick fork. And them poor cows hollerin' to be milked, and finally I told him, 'Lard almighty man, go out there and take out enough milk to relieve their pain anyways, even if you don't care about no milk check next week.' So he did. Well, here we are. Where d'you want me to put the roast to keep it warm. Here! Give me that knife, I'll peel the taters. Don't you get no help? Where're your kids? You get started on the rolls, woman. This house's goin' to be crawlin' with starving people before we get turned around and us without a thing to put in their mouths. I thought I told you Big J flour's better'n this other stuff. Lard! I don't know what's goin' to happen to us. Ten o'clock milkin'; I tell you, I thought I'd never live to see the day."

And then the green jungle explodes into white brightness and comes alive as cousins and uncles and aunts begin the tribal dance around the tree and offer the hecatombs to the angry powers of hunger and love: roast chicken, roast turkey, hams, and pork shoulders, brown gravies, chicken gravies, sage and giblet stuffing, candied yams and sweet potatoes, mashed potatoes, cranberry sauce, creamed corn, wax beans, lima beans, and string beans, carrots — tossed salads, potato salad, gelatin salads, cream pies, fruit pies, mince pies, pumpkin pies, chocolate cakes and white cakes, jello and whipped cream and sliced bananas, candy in dishes and boxes, apples, oranges and bananas — and one cup of coffee brewed just for Uncle Heber, and for him, too, the cracked saucer for the ashes of his cigar.

And above the crack of celery, the clack of china, the clink of silverware, the chattering drone and occasional giggle or scream, and through the acrid halo of smoke around Uncle Heber's head comes Aunt Em: "It's a foul habit and an abomination in the sight of God, Heber, and I'd rather see my brother take to drink than terbakker the way you do. And coffee defiles the temple of the spirit in a worse way, and Louisa's curtain'll smell of Christmas and sin until the Fourth of July because of you."

And through the drone and chatter, Uncle Heber: "Sis, you finish your meal in your way; I'll finish mine in mine. The Prophet used to smoke, so did Brother Brigham — and chew. They chewed and spit like any man. I sin in good company. Fact is, sis, if the truth was known, smokin' and coffee got to be a sin because Joseph had an allergy. Used to break out in hives after every cup of

Joe and every satisfying drag, so he made both a sin. Say, get me a stove match will you, sis, while yer up — in the kitchen there. See? A good cigar goes out if it ain't appreciated."

And then through the long dying of the day, the world beyond the clearing behind the stove goes on. Bomba frees the friendly white girl, eats a tapir, while through the jungle wall from far away come the shouts and squeals of cousin and brother and sister play, the falsetto chirping of Aunt talk, and the grumbling bass of Uncle talk. And as the Army Boys march aboard the transport in New York to go to France with "Lafayette, we are here," on their lips, there hovers in the air of the stifling, coal-gas smelling hold of the transport:

"Franklin D. Roosevelt was sent by God to lead his children out of bondage."

"I like that man's smile. Then he sticks them cig-roots in his mouth and I tell you I jist don't know!"

"We should have won that game on the Fourth; Freddie just got a leetle tired. . . ."

"Walkin' on to my farm and tellin' me what I can grow and what I can't. I sicked the dog on that little pipsqueak. . . ."

"Doak, that big elephant, fannin' twice with men on. . . . Never could hit a round-house out."

". . . on relief until his first paycheck . . . blew it all one weekend at Elko. . . ."

"Next time Brig Roberts umpires, I say protest the game. . . ."

"Two of them Clinton players smoke. I seen 'em. . . ."

"Good for them. . . ."

"Heber!"

"Paid in paper script . . . not worth the paper it's. . . ."

". . . kept track the last three games . . . fanned four times with men on. . . ."

"Farmer's the last one to get anything from a government. . . ."

"We got 3.2 beer what we have to risk damnation to drink. But the price of taters's about the same as when Hoover. . . ."

"Eat the taters then and shut up. 'S bettern defilin' the temple of the spirit. . . ."

"Wish I had your spirit in this smoke-cured temple a mine, Em! We'd live forever, that a-way — the two of us."

"Ha!"

"Only hit all year as I remember rolled down that gopher hole back of first base in West Warren for a gound rule double . . . some clean up hitter he is. . . ."

"Don't care how the man smokes. I'd vote for FDR for God tomorrow if I had the chance."

"But President Hoover says. . . ."

"To Hell with President Hoover!"

"Heber! Heber! Heber!"

And now Bart, the oldest, most handsome, most dependable of all the Army Boys in France, escaped from the hospital in the rear, slogs through the nuts, shells, and package wrappings of rural France, wet, cold, delirious, dropping into shell holes as the rat-a-tat-tat of a match-shooting gun rattles out of the living room from behind the sofa. In the lull that follows, as the darkness comes on, a command rips across the subdued murmur of No-Man's Land: Eph-rum! It's milkin' time. Lard! Let's go on home and see how many cow's got mastitis from this mornin'. Judas Priest! One thing for sure. Never milk a cow, never have to. They'll have their bags caked-up like a lick of salt. Come

on, Eph!"

And Uncle Heber, rising from the waves of cigar smoke, "Emmie, sit down. For the love of all the Lamanites. I only see you about once a year, it seems like."

She, settling back into the sofa, "That's for sure." There is a long quiet. Then, "But Heber, when're you going to come to your senses and make your peace with me and the Church."

"I'm ready, Emmie, always have been. For you or the Church. But I figger the Church'll be a dang sight easier to settle up with than you."

From inside the pill-box in the living room comes another burst of fire, and Bart, with his dependent buddies, crawls along a little stream in the gloomy twilight, trying to get a bearing on the mortar lobbing rounds into the Company. And Bart whispers, "I'm going over there to see what it looks like, anyway."

"No, no, Bart," from his friends. But he, "Remember the *Lusitania*." Ashamed, they say no more. "It may not be what I'm after, but just beyond that hill is where I need a pig for winter dressing up, and if Parley P. Brown — Goodie-Two-Shoes Brown, we called him in school — has got what I want —"

"Heber! That's talk I won't hear. He's a God-fearing man and —"

"And a man practically lacking in the power of speech, Em, that's what he is. Why, Em, whenever I think you're right, that I'm a sinner temporarily damned to a lower degree of glory, I remember the day I went over there to buy that pig. We're out in the pen — a sloppy pen if you ever see one — and all these weaner pigs are grunting around in there. I've got this gunny sack and a three foot piece of two-by-four, but Parl Brown don't do things that way. No sir! 'You stay here,' he says, and he crawls in that stuff. 'I'll return presently with a shoat.' 'Return! Presently! Shoat! The man can't talk. Well — anyhow — he slops into the pen. He corners one of the wet-snouted little balderdroppers, lunges at it and, by Christmas, misses by half a foot — skids into the plank wall. Judas Priest, I thought he'd killed himself. Picks himself up. Scrapes himself off. Looks over at me. You could hardly see his face. 'Little rascals,' he says, and grins; then he corners another. Dives again, skids, misses, splatters, hits, stands up, wipes away at himself a bit. 'Elusive little tykes,' he says, turns, gets ready to do it again. I've had enough. 'Parl!' I beller at him. He looks around. I crawl over the fence. By Jaspers, I'm near tears. 'Parl, for Juniper's sweet loving sake, man, don't talk to pigs like that. Now you go on, get out of here!' He goes, me pushin' him. Then I turns to the litter and looks them square in the eye. They're all backed into one side and a corner, still and quiet. They'd sensed the change right off. Then I holds my two-by out in front where they can see it. I drops my sack open, the mouth of it facing them. I squats down on my haunches and teeters a bit. Then I says, real tight and lowlike: 'Now — you little thin-snouted, bleary-eyed runty-backed, spiral-tailed sons of this litter, one of you hop into this sack.' Why, almost immediately, you might say, the one nearest the sack trots over, sniffs a bit, squeals a little, and walks in the sack and curls up. I snaps the sack to, ties it with a piece of binder twine, hoists it over my shoulder, climbs in the pick-up, and brings it along home. Paid Parl a day later by check. Well, Emmie, you see the point? Sin has its place. A man like Parley P. Brown might not defile the curtains in the parlor, might make it all the way to the Celestial degree of glory, but he's not worth a good God-damn in a pig pen."

"Heber!"

Then the war draws to its close in the snow of winter and the troops march home from No-Man's Land, over there, over there — across the rubble of papers and candy and peanuts and broken toys and needles from the tree, and, suddenly, the lights all over the world come on to Mother's: "You'll ruin your eyes, son, reading in the dark behind that heater."

And only the others are there now — the other two and Dad and Mother — and we eat a sandwich of cold chicken and have some milk out of the big pan in the pantry and we have family prayer around a chair in the kitchen. Kneeling there, the linoleum hard and cold on our knees, everything is love and one and whole. The day is blest, and all the days to come.

In the bedroom we shiver against the cold sheets and giggle and fight for warmth against each other.

Lying in the darkness, we hear the squeak of the snow under Dad's boots as he walks for the check-up to the barn and hear the sounds of cleaning up from the kitchen.

Overhead the attic creaks as the old house sways a little in the winter chill that comes down on a black wind from the black mountains to the east and moves through the valley and across the salt lake and into all the years to come — but that cannot touch the bed-covering warmth of a Christmas that is past.

