



Christmas

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"A Friend"

by Ann Moore

On a little hill, set back from the road and away from the town, was an old, tumble-down house, the drab picture of forlornness. A feeble light shone through an old, dingy window pane. The shutters, moved by the howling wind, banged against the side of the house, making an eerie noise. The swirling snow was piling in drifts against the house. It was dusk and the feeble light from the window made the falling snow glisten as it passed through the beam.

Inside the ancient house, a fire in an old, crumbling fireplace was giving forth its heat and light into one small room. A table, placed in the room's center, was spread for a meal. A simple meal it was. It consisted of a piece of old, hard bread, a few beans, and a cup of hot broth. Beside the table was a chair and in the chair was the lone occupant of the house. He was a small boy about seven or eight years old. His clothes were old and ragged, but they were clean. He needed a new pair of shoes and a warm coat. His hair was long and shaggy. His face showed the pain of some inward anguish.

After he had eaten his supper, the boy put on an old coat, opened the door, and walked out into the crisp winter night. He

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HEAR THOSE BELLS?

In the last frantic days before December 25, somewhere above the bustle of commerce, come the first faint tinklings of the Christmas bells.

Listen there, hear them? Weren't they ringing in the starry eyes of children when four musty trinket boxes came triumphantly down from the attic? And what about that first exciting glimpse of the tree all fresh and icy from the supermarket stall?

That was music, wasn't it, in the fragrant odor of fruitcakes, poundcake, and cookies sifting through the kitchen doors coupled with a wondrous scent of old wine pouring? From the living room there arose such a clatter of cracking nuts--walnuts and pecans--that her majesty, Blackie, the pussycat, came strolling in to see what was the matter.

Out of old boxes came strings of Christmas lights, baubles saved from years ago and the precious Christmas angel for the tip-top tallest green branch. Underneath the tree appeared the manger scene--beloved by all. And this year, something new added: a fence around the tree (to keep hot excited hands of littlest angel well away from the fragil wonders).

Out on the back porch, busy hands assembled box-bush branches (carefully clipped from the lower

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GOING HOME

Oh yes, going home at last, come to think of it, I haven't been home for Christmas in six years. I sure hope everything is the same as it was then. Everyone used to be so carefree and happy; I guess all of my friends are married and have children by now. Oh well, what to heck. Man am I as sleepy as a grizzly bear eating a comb of honey in the middle of January! Started snowing again. Road must be getting slick, but I guess this old bus will make it all right. Well, coming into Trenton now; guess it won't be much longer. Well, we are off and rolling again; guess I'll catch forty winks between here and home. Ho hum zzzzzzzzz... screech, crash, blam, tinkle! Where am I? Oh, such a peaceful sleep, there seems to be a slight pain in my right side: can't seem to move my legs, or arms, feel like, well, there is no feeling in them. I think I moved--no, there was someone moving me. But why can't I see them? I'm drifting again--slowly drifting, sinking--slowly moving into darkness. I can't hear anything or see anything. It's frightening, Help me! Someone catch me! I'm slipping, help me!

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