



PROLOGUE

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"The Candle in the Window" is the story of Tod Witherspoon, a grizzled, shrewd, lovable old man on a Western Kansas rural mail route. His is the story of a simple, yet glorious, Christmas. The eternal story of brotherly love—of peace on earth, good will toward men.

Faith, courage, tenderness, pathos—they're all a part of "The Candle in the Window." You'll find a lump in your throat when you read it. It's not a sad story, but it's one that will remind you of past Christmas joys, of old-fashioned sleigh bells, of holly-decked homes and the poignant pleasures and sorrows of childhood.

And it will remind you, too, of another Christmas—just 1939 years ago. There was no tinsel, no glittering decorations. Just unutterable joy and supreme contentment.

IT WAS a blizzard-beaten night in early December. The highways were blocked by drifts, and train service on the Star City branch was annulled. A jolly crowd of us, hotel "regulars," and storm-stayed commercial travelers, were gathered snug and warm in the Star House lobby together. Among our number were four men, any one of whom, each in his own way, could have entertained the entire company. They were old Abram Star, owner of the hotel, and the richest man in Star county; Tec Jennings, his clerk, the best dresser in town; Elbert McCullen, who, besides being attorney for the railroad, is the ablest lawyer on the upper Smoky; and a New York City salesman, a man of the world, unmistakably Eastern, but altogether companionable. We joked and laughed, and chatted about the weather, the business outlook, European finances, the Oriental situation, off-year elections, the coming holidays, and finally—growing reminiscent, as homeless men will do sometimes—of Christmas days of other years.

"Seems like Christmas would wear out sometime," the salesman declared. "It's so awfully overdone, or underdone, you'd think the rich would throw it up, and the poor would give it up. Must be just the commercial value at the bottom of it that keeps it alive. Great guns! Just listen to that wind and sleet. Looks like we would be here till Christmas ourselves. A country like this is no place for my business. How do they know when the day comes out here anyhow?"

"Lots of ways of finding out," Elbert McCullen declared. "I guess it's about the same Christmas here, only two hours later, that they have on the Atlantic seaboard. And there must be something besides commercial value to it in either place. How about it, Abram?"

"Well, mebbe it's just an old man's idea, but there's always a memory deep down in every man's insides that keeps him looking back sometimes to the best one he ever had, you know, comparing all other Christmas days with that one. And that's a memory you don't buy or sell, either," old Abram declared.

It was thus we turned back reminiscently, as homeless men will do sometimes, recalling the outstanding Christmas days with each of us, when the street door opened suddenly and Tod Witherspoon blew in.

Tod is the mail carrier on the rural route up the Smoky Hill valley—a shrewd, homely, intensely "man, local" character, whose list of friends is one with the community's census. In all western Kansas his is the longest, loneliest route, with bits of the roughest road-way in it. But nobody ever heard Tod complain, and there is no record on the government files that he ever missed a day on it since it was established.

"Room with bath? Please register," Tec Jennings leaned across the desk and greeted Tod with a wide grin.

"Get into this here warm corner. We've been savin' of it for you," Abram Star declared.

"Thaw yourself out a bit, old man, and then join in the services. We're having an old-fashioned experience meeting," the genial salesman declared, jovially.

"That's the stuff," Elbert McCullen broke in. "We've been harkin' back to Christmas days of yesterday, seeing there will be another dawn on us in just a few weeks. What was the best one in all your life, Tod?"

Tod is only a rural mail carrier, yet nobody in the lobby that night could equal him when it came to telling a story in his own simple way. I wish I could repeat the one he told us that night just as he gave it to us. That would be worth listening to. But I cannot do it. We have heard him tell many a tale of his childhood among the Vermont hills, and when he settled down comfortably in his chair, we began to hark back to our own boyhood days to be ready for his picture. But nobody could ever quite forecast Tod Witherspoon, any more than they could reproduce his quaint humor, and his appealing sympathy. What I am telling you here is only a poor imitation of the real Tod as he told us of the best Christmas he had ever known.

TAKE a night like this to make a fellow remember better things, and rememberin' things is good for all of us once in a while. Some winter, this, for early December, I'll say. Awfully good for the wheat, but not so easy on us rural routers. But most folks in the country would rather have the snow than their mail on account of the crops next summer. And I don't know as I can blame 'em. It's the crops they live by more'n the Star City Gazette, and the mail order catalogs, and tractor ads, and pamphlets on diseases of cattle and the like, that we're always packin' to them.

"Twa'n't that way durin' the World War, though, with everybody's hearts bustin' about their boys. Some of 'em was already over seas. You know, some of 'em got in ahead of their own government, and was either runnin' ambulances or goin' over the top themselves, while we was still considerin' the etiquette of the situation. And most of the boys that wasn't over there already, or wasn't too flat-footed to march, or too flat-headed for anything but a roll-top desk brigade, was already in trainin' camps waitin' to go any minute. I tell you, gentlemen, nothin' looked quite so good out in the rural districts—specially to the mothers—as us mail-carriers joggin' over the hills, and up through the canons of the Smoky River valley, and stoppin' at their corners. If they wasn't right down there themselves, where the nests of mail-boxes was stuck on some old wag on wheel set on a post, mebbe they was sendin' the children down, or watchin' from the winders to see how long we stayed sortin' out the mail there. Why I got well acquainted with more women than twenty months we was makin' the route safe for submarines, and silk petticoats, and safety-razors, than I'd done in twenty years before. Awful thing that war was. And yet the best Christmas I ever see, or ever hope to see, was right in the middle of the thing, the Christmas of 1917. Saint Peter, himself, couldn't make a better one for me, either," old Abram declared.

in pace to the custom of my own boyhood days of puttin' candles in the winders on Christmas Eve, and I conceived the notion of takin' one to every mail-box on my route. There wasn't so many of 'em it would bust my bank account to do it. That was the time I froze so near to death I didn't get thawed out proper till along about wheat harvest the next summer. Makes me shiver in August, now just to think of that Christmas Eve.

Tod paused and slid back in his chair studying the face of the city salesman before he went on.

You see, gentlemen, Uncle Sam's hired man out on these rural routes knows a lot more about his people than the city man on the same job does. It's the humanest business they is under government control, and the biggest thing Uncle Sam ever did, runnin' them lines idly out into the lonely places that 'd welcome your comin' if you never even brought 'em a post card. Sort of a voice from the outside world they've never had a chance to know, and it keeps 'em from turnin' anarchist, and hatin' imaginary oppressors, and breaks down their little prejudices against their neighbors. That's what the rural routes have done everywhere; and especially up in the pockets of the Smoky Hill valley where life was mighty natter, and shut in, and folks was poor. That's where my happiest Christmas come from, though, measurin' happiness by what's inside of you, and not by what somebody else can lay at your feet.

These cross-roads mail-box folks come to look on the mail carrier as they do on the family doctor, or the preacher in some ways. He calls them by their first names, and visits with them in little short chats, and hurries when they're lookin' for letters from their children gone away, or their sweethearts. And he generally knows without no black-edged envelopes when he's bringin' bad news. Oh, it's a great life, full of what the newspapers call "human interest," when you count your friends by the country mail-boxes, every single one of them with its own story of hopes and needs.

Tod paused again, and his weather-hardened face grew tender.

THAT holiday of 1917 meant a lot to my route. Boys that had lived all their lives till then up in the hills, or out on these short-grass plains, boys that hadn't never seen a tree bigger'n the little logues 'round the court-house square, nor a garden flower nor nothin' nearer to it than this here burnin' bush shrub—some of them boys was powerful close to the front line trenches in France that year! And others was nailed down in trainin' camps that wa'n't none too cozy and homelike that bitter winter. No wonder their folks watched for me like they'd watch for the doctor when the fever is the highest. I see a foreign post mark on a letter now and then today, and it takes me right back to them months when we wasn't too proud to fight, and our hearts wasn't so hard they wouldn't break.

They was one family that never watched for me, though, for they never had any mail at all, nor even a mailbox till some time that fall. That was Grandma Gabels 'way back in the hills. You couldn't see the house from the road, and if it hadn't been for little P'like Gabel I'd never found 'em at all, I suppose. Odd little tyke as ever lived, P'like was, the cub that give me the best Christmas I ever had. That wasn't his real name, of course, just a nickname I had for him. Nobody except a foreigner'd ever give a name like that to a child. I think they registered him as Tully Gabel when he started to school, but he was always just like P'like to me, and awfully interestin' though he was only a sturdy, round, button-headed, little nubbun, like most of the children on my route. But if you really study the little faces, as I've had plenty of time to do, comin' and goin', all these years—children are like open books and easy to read; that's why they are children and not little grown-ups—if you study their faces, I say, they ain't no two of 'em alike. Little P'like had a mop of light hair gettin' darker, and the brightest brown eyes that was ever come to see with, seemed to me ne come and a pin in the middle of the road, and as for the dark, he could look right through it, and walk without a stumblin' step straight where he wanted to go. I never see a youngster so solid on his feet anyhow. And he wasn't no more afraid in the blackest night that ever swallowed up the Smoky Hill valley, than I am settin' here in the Star House lobby.

I used to pick little P'like up and take him home from the school. They say mail carriers can't do that some places. Well, there never was a postal regulation against bein' human ever reached as far as my route. School was always out early them days because some of the youngsters had miles to go. They didn't start these school out busses in the school districts to pick up the little children till after the war. My route was a longer way for little P'like, because it makes a loop of the end. But he liked the

ride. And he could cut across from the other side on a shorter way than the one through the canon side nearer to the school house, and get home all right.

That little chap was a dreamer, livin' in a make-believe world all his own, like children will sometimes if you let 'em alone. That was what give him his name. It was always "let's play like," with him, and he shortened it himself to just "p'like." He'd "p'like" my old mail cart was a chariot and "p'like" the upper Smoky trail was a circus ring; that the rocks of the canon were castles; "p'like" he was a prince, and I was the king of fairyland. Took a whale of a lot of imagination for that last "p'like," but that little fellow was a whale at pretendin'.

Tod grinned at his listeners. No man in Kansas ever looked less kindly than Tod Witherspoon and he knew it.

I DON'T believe old John Milton ever see more in his "Paradise Lost" than little P'like Gabel could



Tod paused again and his weather-hardened face grew tender.

create out of the sunsets and big bluffs and lonely trails up that barren valley.

Old Mrs. Gabel came here from Kentucky with him and her own boy, Tobe. The little cub was an orphan findin' and no relation to her at all. Wasn't the same breed of cats as the Gabels, neither, for he was made of better stuff, primarily. But she was a wonderful woman someways, built big and stout out of real pioneer timber that stands up strong. They were awfully poor, never took even a paper 'cept what I'd run into their mail box for 'em once in awhile, after I found 'em out. I don't think Mrs. Gabel ever read anything much except her old Bible, and that was part readin' and part just hearsay with her. She tended her little ranch, and took care of the stock and crops, what she had of both, and kept house, never buyin' anything hardly, but livin' on what she could produce on the place. It was a lonely life out on that little ranch, hid back among the hills from the trail, out of sight of anybody's house. Never a neighbor's light in a winder at night to tell her they was other human bein's like herself not so far away.

Tobe, her boy, must have been over thirty then, in years, mind you, but really not a day older'n little P'like. The neighbors out that way told me that Tobe's older brother was lost in the Kentucky mountains just before Tobe was born, and Grandma Gabel grieved so for him—she never did find him, and his father died from exposure huntin' for him—that when Tobe came he just stayed a little boy in mind, happy and good, and willin' to do anything he was told. But he never grew up.

They say there was something wrong about fastenin' a gate, just the other way 'round, that let the lost child out some way, and he wandered off. Somebody up in the mountains, where most of 'em can't read a signboard, if there was any there to read, saw the little fellow, and out of ignorance, started him home the wrong way—and he perished. Tobe has that mark, too; does everything backwards. I found that out when he put up a mail box, number 33, to please little P'like, because all the other children had mail-boxes. Tobe marked it 33, instead of 33.

They tell me, too, the neighbors do, that little Tully, as the Gabels call him, was found where somebody that didn't want him had left him—mebbe just a tiny cub. I don't know the particulars of that—but anyway, when he was found, Grandma Gabel just took him to her heart in place of her own boy lost about a quarter of a century before. It was then she picked up and left Kentucky for good, and all, and came to Kansas to forget. But you don't forget that way, gentlemen. You can't move away and leave your memories in the old house with the broken step-ladder, and the cracked fruit jars. And Grandma Gabel's heart stayed back in the mountains. And she is ever thinkin' of their purple tops, and the little grassy coves in the Blue Ridges.

But little P'like was the happiest

kid on the upper Smoky the day his box was put up, though, as I say, they never had any mail that I didn't put into it myself for them. But that youngster never missed a day lookin' into it. Seemed like he was always longin' to get a letter from somewhere. And he'd get big-eyed and all excited, if he found an old circular, or something like that in it, though he wasn't fooled by it at all. He was too blamed quick for that. But he could "p'like" it was something for his grandma from Kentucky, because he knew she loved the old Blue Grass country so. And when you think of the dry treeless little ranch hid back in the Smoky Hill valley, you can't wonder.

School was heaven to little P'like, and he licked up learnin' something wonderful. Seemed like I could just see his mind growin' every day. It was like watchin' a vine on a trellis, the knowin' way he had of reachin' out and catchin' on higher up like. He was just a little deserted foundlin' of a woodscalf, picked up



in the Kentucky mountains, outside of the protection of the State Game Laws, and worth nothin' at all, if it hadn't seemed to a poor, ignorant, heart-broken woman he might sort of take the place of her own boy lost so many years before. And I knew pretty soon, because us rural mail carriers learns to look right through house walls on our routes and know what's inside of 'em—I knew he was, all unknowin', beginnin' to be a real light-bearer into that lonely little home on the ranch lost sight of in the upper Smoky hills. He took every single thing he learned in the schoolhouse along with him. And it wasn't only just his little First Reader, and the numbers. It was clean finger nails, and bowin' his head to say the Lord's Prayer, and the most amazin' scraps of information from listenin' to the older classes recitin', all openin' a new world to his big bright eyes and dreamin' soul.

THE teacher out in District 33—the farthest one on my route, it was—a strange girl that nobody knew anything about. You remember, Abram, she come in here that fall one evenin' when the train was late, and left early the next mornin' for that school settlement; and as far as I know Star City never did see her again. But teachers of any kind was so scarce in 1917 on account of Red Cross, and high-grade pay for any-grade clerks in Washington—specially teachers worth a darn for a district like that one up on the Smoky Hill, that they was only too glad to get anybody willin' to come to them. Nobody knew how long that war would hang on. The real smart ones was declarin' it couldn't end under ten years.

So when this girl wearin' one of these sorority pins, and carryin' a diploma from some college, sort of dropped in from howhere and offered to teach their school, District 33 took her as God's providence without a murmur. Her name was Ruth Ravenstow. She had big dark eyes, and about the prettiest hair I ever see. But her face was white as chalk. Never a bit of color in her cheeks, and never a smile on her lips, even when she was talkin' to the children that just adored her. Just a hard, white face, with no more show of feelin' in it than a marble woman. There wasn't no warmth of life about her, and yet she had that strange soft of what you call magnetism, that draws everybody in spite of themselves.

The schoolhouse they had then—it's just a pile of earth now—was an old soddy built back in the late seventies or early eighties—warm in winter, of course, as the soddies always was; and big enough, too, for they was only eleven children in District 33. P'like's mailbox was the same number, the only figures he knew when it was put up. He'd read them on the old soddy door the mornin' he started to school, and like every other snip of learnin' they stayed with him, and he used them. God's mercy was in it, too, but that comes later. Just a little sod school house and less'n a dozen children, but Miss Ravenstow was an angel of light to them eleven kids that winter. You can't begin to know how poor they were, and how few things there was in their hard, barren lives to give them pleasure. Miss Ruth had a little

phonograph, the kind you can put into a hat box, and a stack of the sweetest song records you ever heard, all by real singers, too. Mebbe she never did smile, but she had good taste, dainty and refined to the tips of her pretty white fingers. And she give them children the best things they'd ever know. Lord, how those hungry youngsters ate that music. Just never got enough of it. But it seemed to me that little P'like got the most of all of 'em out of it. Especially one record—"My Old Kentucky Home"—sung by a good rich baritone voice, full and sweet.

Way back in October P'like worked out a plan to do his Christmas shopping early, but he never told me about it till nearly Christmas. He was a close-mouthed little tyke if there ever was one, and when he shut his lips in front of his tongue it was like one of them abalone shells closin' up.

You see, there's never any Santy Claus up that valley, 'specially in District 33. They do what they can for their children, even in the lean years, but it never is much at best. And Grandma Gabel hadn't no time out of her hard days' work, week after week, from Christmas to Christmas, to make anything for little Tully—and never a cent to spend buyin' him anything. You can't make holidays much of anything without them two necessities—time or money, or both. And after P'like started to school Tobe took to wanderin' off that fall, and his mother had to go huntin' for him through the canon, and do all her work and her time was double full.

But how that old woman did love music, though she didn't sing any herself. Hard work bears down heavy on the singin' spirit if you add to it the memory of a lost child and the hopelessness of a living one. And little P'like, who could warble like a bird, never told her a word about the phonograph at school—he was odd that way, always had more inside of him than he'd let on about. But I found out later why he didn't tell her. She just loved to hear him singin' to her at her work, and he'd stand up before her and go clear through a song for her. But he kept it all to himself that he was learnin' a new one to spring on her singin'-hungry soul Christmas mornin'—his girl, you see, as it was, but his best. And he picked out the song he loved best, "My Old Kentucky Home." His eyes would just shine like the stars reflected on the still Smoky waters when he'd tell me about it. And 'round in the deepest part of the canyon, where the walls run up awfully high, he'd have me stop still, and hear him sing it through. And he'd act out the way he was going to stand up before his grandma, Christmas mornin', and do it, and her never dreamin' he knew the song she loved so well. Oh, boy! the joy that little critter did get out of the surprise he was plannin' seemed strange even to me who sees such a lot of the inside of the life out on the lonely rural ways us routers follows.

THAT fall I got closer to my folks than ever before, owin' of course to the war; and closer to Grandma Gabel through little P'like; and closer to Miss Ravenstow. She had begun to watch for me, too, but with the saddest face I ever see in all my life. Never any expectation in it, nor the merest line as if she thought I'd stopped to give her any mail, though I'd got the habit of stoppin' a minute every single day, even if I did know she wasn't lookin' for a letter. Except for such mail as comes to any teacher, nothin' ever come to her that fall. No postmark but Star City was ever on anything in her box; not a magazine, nor newspaper, nor nothin' but local ads from them that get the County Superintendent's directory, and blank reports to be filled out by teachers every month.

And yet I could see she was starvin' for something, if it wasn't a letter. That's why I stopped every day, hopin' I could help her find it. Little P'like seen it, too. That was what his eyes was for—see with. He used to watch her open her mail to find out if it made her glad at all. Appeared like he was just starvin' to see her smile once. And he seemed to know by a child's instinct it hadn't. It got on his mind terribly. For a girl that never did smile, day in and day out, it was queer how those children did love that teacher. And especially P'like, who worshipped her from the first day. She had put something so new and sweet into his poor dry little child-life over at the Gabel ranch.

"When things I want don't want me," he confided to me one afternoon, "why I just p'like they do come anyhow. I wish I had a phonograph for my grandmas." He said it so wishful like. "But I haven't and I can't ever get one, and I'm never going to tell her there is one."

"Why mebbe you can get one when you grow up, a big man, and you will help her to have a lot of things," I suggested to him, "savin' clearly now why the little cub hadn't mentioned the phonograph at home."

"Won't I be like Tobe, and have to be looked after, too?" he asked wonderingly.

It hadn't ever occurred to him he