

A Frontier Christmas

I remember a day one winter that stands out like a boulder in my life. The weather was unusually cold, our salary had not been regularly paid, and it did not meet our needs when it was. My husband was away travelling from one district to another much of the time. Our boys were well, but my little Ruth was sick, and at best none of us was decently clothed. I patched and re-patched, with spirits sinking to their lowest ebb. The water gave out in the well, and the wind blew through the cracks in the floor.

The people in the parish were kind, and generous too, but the settlement was new, and each family was struggling for itself. Little by little, at the time I needed it most, my faith began to waver. Early in life I was taught to take God at His Word, and I thought my lesson was well-learned. I had lived upon the promises in dark times, until I knew, as David did, who was my fortress and deliverer. Now, a daily prayer for forgiveness was all that I could offer. My husband's overcoat was hardly thick enough for October, and he was often obliged to hike miles to attend some meeting or funeral.

Many times, our breakfast was Indian cake, and a cup of tea without sugar. Christmas was coming; the children always expected their presents. I remember the ice was thick and smooth, and the boys were each craving a pair of skates. Ruth was longing for a large fancy baby doll. I knew it was impossible for us to give each child its present. It seemed as if God had deserted us, but I did not tell my husband all this.

He worked so earnestly and heartily, I supposed him to be as hopeful as ever. I kept the living room cheerful with an open fire and tried to serve our scanty meals as invitingly as I could.

The morning before Christmas, James was called to see a sick man. I put up a piece of bread for his lunch – it was the best I could do – wrapped my plaid shawl around his neck and then tried to whisper a promise, as I had often done, but the words died away upon my lips. I let him go without it.

That was a dark, hopeless day. I coaxed the children to bed early, for I could not bear their talk. When Ruth went, I listened to her prayer; and asked for the last time most explicitly for her dolly baby and for skates for her brothers. Her bright face looked so lovely when she whispered to me, “You know I think they will be here early tomorrow morning, Mama,” that I thought I could move heaven and earth to save her from disappointment. I sat down alone and gave way to the most bitter tears.

Before long James returned, chilled and exhausted. He drew off his boots. The thin stockings slipped off with them, and his feet were red with cold. “I wouldn't treat a dog that way; let alone a faithful servant,” I said. Then, as I glanced up and saw the hard lines in his face and the look of despair, it flashed across me, James had let go too. I brought him a cup of tea, feeling sick and dizzy at the very thought. He took my hand, and we sat for an hour without a word. I wanted to die and meet God and tell Him His promise was not true, my soul was so full of rebellious despair.

Then came a sound of bells, a quick step, and a loud knock at the door. James sprang to open it.

There stood Deacon White. “A box came for you by express just before dark. I brought it around as soon as I could get away. Reckoned it might be for Christmas; at any rate, they shall have it tonight. Here is a turkey my wife asked me to fetch along, and these other things I believe belong to you.” There was a basket of potatoes and a bag of flour. Talking all the time, he hurried in the box, and then with a hearty goodnight rode away.

Still without speaking, James found a chisel and opened the box. He drew out first a thick red blanket, and we saw that beneath was full of clothing. It seemed at that moment as if Christ fastened upon me a look of reproach. James sat down and covered his face with his hands.

“I can't touch them,” he exclaimed; “I haven't been true, just when God was trying me to see if I could hold out. Do you think I could not see how you were suffering, and I had no word of comfort to offer?” I know now how to preach the awfulness of turning from God.”

“James,” I said, clinging to him, “don’t take it to heart like this; I am to blame, I ought to have helped you. We will ask Him together to forgive us.”

“Wait a moment, dear, I cannot talk now.”

Then he went into another room. I knelt, and my heart broke; in an instant all the darkness, all the stubbornness rolled away. Jesus came again and stood before me, but now with the loving word: ‘Daughter!’ Sweet promises of tenderness and joy flooded my soul, I was so lost in praise and gratitude that I forgot everything else. I don’t know how long it was before James came back; but I knew that he too had found peace.

“Now, my dear wife” said he, “Let us thank God together and then he poured out words of praise—Bible words, for nothing else could express our thanksgiving.

It was 11 o’clock, the fire was low, and there was the great box, and nothing touched but the warm blanket we needed. We piled on some fresh logs and began to examine our treasures. We drew out an overcoat. I made James try it on; just the right size, and I danced around him, for all my light-heartedness had returned. Then, there was a cloak, and he insisted on seeing me in it. My spirits always infected him, and we both laughed like foolish children. There was a warm suit of clothes also, and three pair of woolen hose. There was a dress for me and yards of flannel, a pair of arctic overshoes for each of us and in mine was a slip of paper.

I have it now and mean to hand it down to my children. It was Jacob’s blessing to Asher, “*Your shoes shall be iron and brass, and as thy days so shall thy strength be*” (Deut 33:25). In the gloves, evidently for James, the same dear hand had written, “*I the Lord thy God will hold thy right hand, saying unto thee, ‘Fear not, for I will help thee.’*”

It was a wonderful box, packed with thoughtful care. There was a suit of clothes for each of the boys, and a little red gown for Ruth. There were mittens, scarves and hats. Down in the center was a box, we opened it and there was a great big doll. I burst into tears again, and James wept with me for joy. It was too much, and then we both exclaimed again, for close behind the doll came two pairs of skates. There were books for us to read—some of them I had wished to see; stories for the children to read; aprons and underclothing, knots of ribbon, a lovely picture, needles, buttons and thread, and a muff, and an envelope containing a ten-dollar gold piece.

At last we cried over everything we took up. It was past midnight, and we were faint and exhausted even with happiness. I made a cup of tea, cut a fresh loaf of bread, and James boiled some eggs. We drew up the table before the fire; how we enjoyed our supper! And then we sat talking over our life, and how sure a help God always proved.

You should have seen the children the next morning! The boys raised a shout at the sight of their skates. Ruth caught up her doll and hugged it tightly without a word; then she went up to her room and knelt by her bed. When she came back, she whispered to me, “I knew it would be here, Mamma, but I wanted to thank Jesus just the same.”

“Look here, wife, see the difference.” We went to the window, and there were the boys out of the house already and skating on the crust with all their might. My husband and I both tried to return thanks unto God every day since. Hard times have come again and again, but we have trusted in Him, dreading nothing so much as a doubt of His protecting care. Over and over again we have proved that “they that seek the Lord shall not want any good thing.”

Mr. L.E. Maxwell read this at B.S. Christmas Chapel – December 1971