



WHILE THE CHRISTMAS CANDLES ARE BURNING

Ring the bells of Christmas—
Let every one take part.
Christmas smiles on every face
And Christmas in the heart.

The joy of Christmas depends altogether on the amount of the Christmas spirit in the heart. It does not depend upon the amount of money you have to spend on gifts, nor upon the intrinsic value of the gifts you receive. This little bit of platitudinous moralizing was inspired by a little story told by a Nebraska pioneer the other day. Here is the story, told briefly:

"I moved to what is now Lincoln county, Nebraska, in the early 80's and took up a homestead a few miles from where the little city of Wallace now stands. All I had in the world was a wife and three small children, a rather poor team of horses, a poorer cow, a few chickens, a couple of hogs, a few simple farm implements, less than a hundred dollars in money and a determination to make a home. It was a mighty desolate out there. Our nearest neighbor, as poor as myself, lived more than eight miles away, and within a radius of fifty miles there were less than fifty homesteaders. The first two or three Christmas days were pretty slim for the children, but we raised a little popcorn which was utilized on Christmas, and the good wife made some mittens and other things, and these with a little molasses candy made at home constituted the 'joys of Christmas' in that sod house.

"We were there three or four years ahead of the railroad, and it was not until the iron horse came through that we really had a Christmas celebration in which money played a part. And you couldn't guess in a century how we got the money. Bones!

"Yes, sir; bones were the foundation of the whole thing—buffalo bones. The prairies were literally covered with dry and bleached buffalo bones, and some enterprising pioneer learned that there was a market for them in the east, where they were ground into fertilizer. Before the first train pulled into Wallace we pioneers had hauled hundreds of wagon loads of buffalo bones to town, and we got good money for them. I presume that taken altogether three or four hundred carloads of bones were shipped from Wallace before the industry was exhausted.

"With the money we got for our bones—sounds kind o' shuddery, don't it?—my wife and I bought the children some 'store clothes,' some toys, a lot of 'store candy' and some colored candles. We went over in the canon and cut a cedar tree, and we had a real, old-fashioned Christmas in that sod house that Christmas eve.

"We don't live in a sod house now. Neither have we any children of our own to make a Christmas for. But, just the same, we have a Christmas tree every year, and there are children to enjoy—the children of the two boys and the girl whose first real Christmas tree in Nebraska was the direct result of buffalo bones. And among the most cherished relics in our home are a few pairs of polished buffalo horns. I never look at them without recalling how the bones of the noble animals that bore them not only helped us give our

little ones a real Christmas tree, but actually kept us from feeling the pangs of privation."

Light the Christmas candles,
For Santa Claus draws nigh;
The Christmas bells are ringing,
The backlog blazing high.

"While the 'backlog' burns."
That doesn't mean anything to the young folks of today who live in steam-heated flats and furnace-cooled houses. We say "furnace-cooled" with full knowledge of the facts.

But mention of the "backlog" brings up fond memories to the white haired girls and boys of days ago. The great, open fireplace that fairly occupied one end of the sitting room in the old farm house, the swinging crane, the blazing logs, the dancing shadows upon ceiling and wall—

"Now, mother, tell us about Christmas before the war."

And we recall the sweet-faced, gray-haired little mother who used to tell us how Christmas was spent on the old Missouri farm "before the war," and always it included a story of the backlog. This is how it was:

Christmas was the great event with the colored folks. It meant lots of gifts from massa and missus, dancing in the cabins, visiting with neighboring farms and plantations and "high jinks" generally, just as long as the backlog burned. That was the rule. Christmas eve the older slaves would haul a huge backlog up to the master's house, drag it into the big sitting room with merry song and laughter, and carefully place it in the big fireplace. The glowing coals were raked down, the backlog placed, the coals heaped over it and the fireplace filled with lightwood knots and oak and hickory chunks. And as long as that backlog burned the Christmas holidays lasted. That was a matter as fixed as the laws of the Medes and Persians.

"The slaves," said the little mother, "used to work a trick on father. Of course he knew it, but he winked at it, and he enjoyed the fun as well as they did. They used to cut the backlog—always the biggest piece of black oak they could find, about four feet long—immediately after the close of the Christmas festivities. Then they would haul it down to the creek and sink it in the water and leave it there to soak until the day before the next Christmas. In the afternoon they would raise that water-soaked log, drag it to the house and about 10 o'clock Christmas eve would put it in the fireplace. It usually took it from five days to a week to burn completely to ashes, and until the last vestige of fire disappeared from it the festivities lasted. There was always a rivalry among the different farms to see which could make the backlog last longest."

If every day was Christmas
And all the world were mine
To do with as I fancied—
How childish eyes would shine!

It takes so little to make a child happy, and the joy of doing it is so great, the wonder of it all is that there are any unhappy children in the world. There may be a lot of satisfaction in building big library buildings, or in contributing huge sums to this or that missionary so-

ciety, but there would be a lot more in making happy the unfortunate little ones who have little or nothing to make them happy. We who live in comfortable homes and are able to prepare the way for Santa Claus to visit our own little ones are very apt to forget the little ones who have never seen the jolly old Christmas saint, never heard the jingle of his sleighbells, never received even the smallest token from his hands. You may think you live in a community where there are no poor, but that is because you never investigated. Just look around a little bit and see if you can not discover a few children whose happiness you can make sure by expending a few dimes. Just how easy it is to make a child happy may be illustrated by the following true incident:

The architect of this department was born while the great civil war was being fought, and while his soldier father was campaigning with Thomas. Two or three years after the war a reunion was held in the little Illinois village where the veteran father was pastor of a little church. Bunting was scarce in those days, and very high priced, and the possessor of a flag had reason to feel proud. The writer's mother was determined that her little boy should carry a flag in the procession on this eventful day, so she proceeded to make one. The crown of an old forage cap furnished the blue for the field, and the judicious use of pokeberry juice furnished the red for the stripes. A piece of white goods furnished the base for the flag. The stars were sewed on the field—the stars being cut out of white flannel. The red stripes were sewed on the white background. But there wasn't enough of the blue to go 'round so it was really only a flag on one side. But it was a flag and the little fellow who carried it that day, tightly clutched in one hand while the other hand clung to the finger of the father whose army coat bore upon its sleeves the stripes of a sergeant, was the happiest boy in all the state of Illinois, if not in the whole world.

For thirty years that little homemade flag was a cherished relic that money could not buy. But in the stress of moving from one town to another some years ago it got lost. But the memory of it still survives, and whenever some incident calls it to mind, along with it comes the memory of a happy childhood, the memory of the best mother a boy ever had, the memory of playmates—a panorama that can not be equalled.

If you want to know just what fun there is in Christmas, make it a point to hunt up some poor little boy or girl and give them a taste of the real Christmas spirit. It will cost but a dollar or two, and you'll draw daily dividends on the investment as long as you live.

The Cedars of the Lebanon
Were doubtless fair to see,
But not a one was equal to
The glorious Christmas tree.

I don't remember the first Christmas tree I ever saw, but the first Christmas tree I remember about grew right out of the pulpit in a little Christian church in Metamora, Ill. A plain little frame church surrounded by a board fence, with a stileblock in front and hitchracks on both sides of the street. The incandescent and arc lights were undreamed of, and the man or woman who had been down to Peoria and seen gas burning was considered a traveler with a record. Smoky kerosene lamps lighted the church, but the Christmas tree was lighted with candles—not "boughten candles," but tallow candles made by the women of the congregation. A candle mold was a household necessity in those days—

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