Christmas in My Heart®

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Five Days Before Christmas

Hope Hale

Martha was busy—Martha like-in-the-Bible busy—for Christmas was just around the corner. And there were so many things she had to do before then.

Then little Philip crumpled on the front porch—unable to move, and had to be carried up to bed. His forehead was hot. No, *she thought,* not just before Christmas!

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Perhaps the last package would never be wrapped, or bought, but the pure joy of giving came to her five days before Christmas.

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The first snow had fallen in the night, covering the lawn with a lavish layer of soft rich white, like the cream frosting on the spice cake Martha had made for the bazaar. The children were utterly out of hand. A white Christmas! But would it last six days? Would it even last till after school? Did they—"Oh, please not, Mommie!"—really have to go to school?

Martha kept answering their questions firmly, trying not to sound impatient—she *had* to get them out of the house—answering all the questions but her husband's. Walter's she could not really hear. It was the waiting look in his eyes as he stood there by the door, big and solid in his gray overcoat, his briefcase under his arm, keys swinging from one finger as he watched her struggle with Philip's boot. The little boy sat listlessly on the lowest step, his head pressed against the wall.

"Mom!" Sandy stamped in from testing the snow. "Put a coat of lacquer on my skis, will you, so it'll dry before—"

She might have laughed, or cried, it was so fantastic. "I have to make cinnamon rolls." She controlled her voice. "And you have to mail those last packages, Sandy, after school. Remember, they're late because you forgot to fire your ashtrays—"

His father said tentatively, "Seems a shame to waste the snow. . . ."

Martha drew a deep breath. She expected to carry the Christmas load, but for him to *add* to her burden . . .

"The last bell's just about to *ring*!" Prilly cried.

"I'll take the kids," Walter said, "if you're sure you—"

The phone rang.

"Oh, take them!" Martha went to answer the phone.

The older children hurried out. Walter pulled Philip to his feet and left. On the telephone Mrs. Carhart talked on about desertions from the committee. She had tried to get Mrs. Todd, whose children were grown up, but she could not come because Mr. T. had to speak in Marbury and she was driving over the Notch with him. "Not to shop, mind you!" Mrs. Carhart said bitterly. "Just to see the snow on the pine trees! She must be mighty scared of losing the Reverend, the way she tags after him!"

Martha had a sudden vision of Pauline Todd, her brown eyes shining below the silvery hair, her lips laughing like a girl's, turning to her husband as they rode through the snow. She felt an absurd pang.

"I'll relieve you for two hours," she told Mrs. Carhart, "while Philip's at his rehearsal."

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Then at last she was in the kitchen, clearing away breakfast, laying out butter and sugar and flour, but not efficiently. It was as if Walter still stood there, swinging his keys, waiting.

She recalled his few words and her hand stopped still. He had wanted to know if she needed the car. He would have walked to his law office through a mile of heavy snow if she had said the word. And she had not answered.

But she had, really. She had told Sandy about the baking. But Walter became deaf when she talked of tasks—deaf or worse. Like last night, when he had found her ironing a red ribbon and she had explained: "Prilly's ashamed of our front door without a wreath."

"Let *her* hang one, then." He had made it sound so easy. She had told him how she planned to use a spray of artificial flowers from an old evening dress and had gilded a toy trumpet of Philip's. He had merely compressed his lips and, after a moment, gone upstairs.

When at last she had crept into bed, he stirred, half asleep, and reached out for her. But she lay stiffly on her side, her limbs tense and aching. Her mind had spun with lists and schedules all night long.

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The children came home for lunch as she took the cinnamon rolls from the oven. "Fe-fi-fo-fum!" Sandy shouted. "I smell something yum!"

Prilly came to sniff, her blue eyes shining, her fair hair curling from under her dark blue hood.

"I'm afraid they're not for us," Martha said reluctantly.

The light in Prilly's eyes dimmed. Sandy groaned.

"Where's Philip?" Martha asked.

"On the front step," Prilly said. "We couldn't get him in."

Martha swooped out to get Philip, the icy wind catching her throat, and brought him into the kitchen. He slumped in a chair, his hand supporting his head. His face was flushed and his eyelids were half closed.

"Don't you feel well, Phil?" She touched his forehead and felt the shock of heat.

"Shall I take him up to bed?" Sandy asked, beside her.

She nodded. Her knees felt too weak to carry her own weight upstairs.

Running for the thermometer, Martha heard a sound and knew she had heard it before: a harsh, barking cough. But this morning she had not noticed; she had been too busy.

Philip did not resist the glass rod under his tongue. He lay on his bed as if pressed into the mattress. She warned herself against panic, walking to the phone. Even if he did have a temperature, it might be nothing.

Dr. Joe was out on calls. His nurse would have him phone. Martha stifled an impulse to phone Walter; he would soon be home.

Philip coughed. She could make a steam tent of his bunk,

she decided, and asked Prilly to put water on the stove. "And, oh, your soup—"

"I've already hotted it. Shall I bring up you and Phil some?"

"Not yet." Martha heard her voice soften. "And you and Sandy have some cinnamon rolls."

They start to whoop and checked themselves. Martha went to the linen closet, got sheets, pinned them as curtains to the upper bunk. The phone rang. "Oh, Mrs. Carhart," she heard Prilly say, "Mother can't. My little brother's ill." Prilly could have been thirty, from her voice, instead of eleven. But she giggled as she came up the stairs. "Mrs. Carhart said, 'Hum.' " She peered in at Philip. "Mother! He's going to be sick!"

Philip's flush had faded to greenish pallor. His hands clutched at the covers. Prilly brought the basin just in time.

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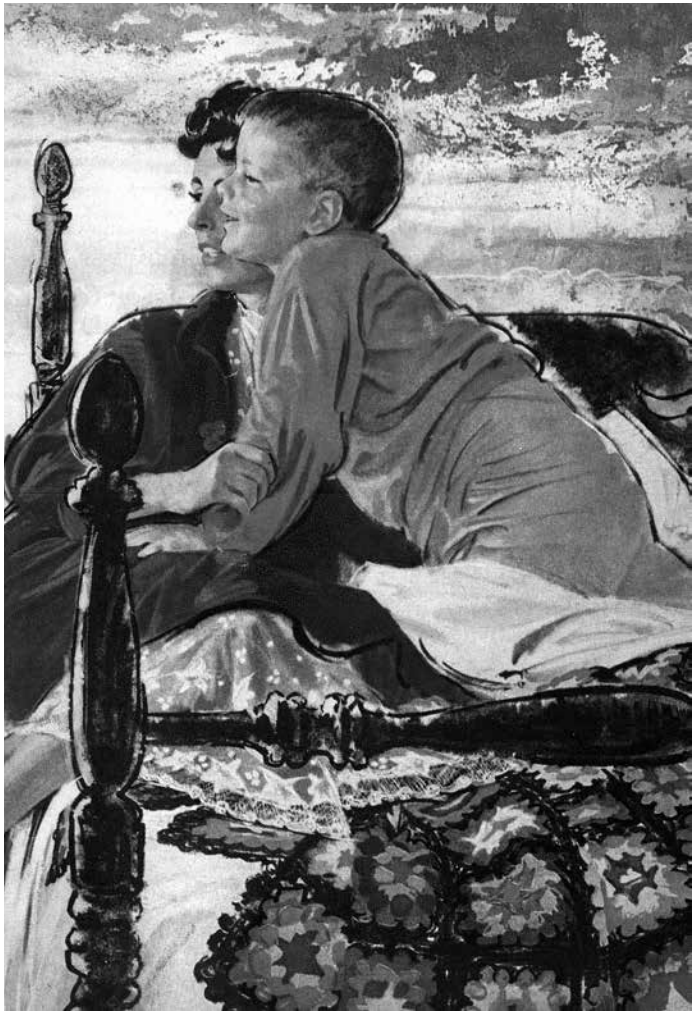
As Philip lay back on the pillows, exhausted, Martha wiped his forehead and told Prilly, "It must be the twenty-four-hour thing. If he's better tomorrow, I may still be able to carry on with—with—" Well, with whatever she had been so busy doing.

"He's just *got* to be well by Christmas," Prilly breathed.

Oh, yes, that was it: shopping, gifts . . .

"After all, our Christmas is only *for* him, really," Prilly added.

Martha turned to look astonished, into the anxious little face. Could this be Prilly, who had presented her list like an ultimatum, decorated freely with asterisks which



referred to a footnote reading, "absolutely essential"?

Remotely, from another world, the school bell rang. The sound of a shovel scraping on concrete stopped abruptly. The door opened downstairs. "Prilly, come on!" Sandy shouted. "It's time."

Prilly started, then stopped. "I'll tell Miss Mikkelson," she said to her mother. "I can take your place decorating. Elspeth and Cathy will help."

"But don't you have a rehearsal too?" Martha asked, a little dazed.

"The heavenly chorus always has to wait for hours," Prilly explained kindly, as to a child. Then she was gone, leaving Martha suddenly, helplessly alone.

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In the silence there was only one sound: Philip's breathing. Wasn't it too fast? Yes, far too fast; there was an urgency about it, as if he drew each breath in haste, for fear— She jumped up quickly and began to tidy the room, snatching up scattered socks, model planes, comic books, her movements jerkily mechanical.

The door opened downstairs and she heard Walter's step on the stairs. The house felt warmer, no longer empty.

"The kids told me," he said in the doorway. He came in and laid his hand on Philip's forehead. "Feels pretty hot and dry."

"I'd better take his temperature again," she said.

Walter did not protest as she had expected. He asked, "Isn't he breathing—well—fast?"

She held her hand firm on the thermometer. "I—I don't know." They waited silent minutes.

"At his age," Walter said low over her shoulder, "temperatures don't necessarily mean a thing."

Was he trying to reassure her or was he asking reassurance? She tried to give it to him with a smile, looking up at him.

His hand moved a little, touched her cheek. She caught it, held it, leaned against him. The contact with his solidness through the rough cloth of his suit steadied her. She drew out the thermometer and saw the bright long line: 103.4.

The phone rang; it would be the doctor. Walter answered, and she felt hysteria rise in her as he said, "Rolls, cake? Uh, sure. Be there in an hour."

Then he called the doctor's number and gave the facts with masculine economy. But he added quietly, "Joe, look—we'll feel a lot better when you see the boy."

She heard him moving around the kitchen. Then he appeared with a tray. "Eat this soup, kid," he told her gruffly. He hadn't called her that since Sandy was born.

"What about you?" she asked.

"I'll have Karl send over something from the diner," he said. "I have to take one last glance at Gronowalski versus Fullerton Trucking Corporation."

"You're not going into court?" she cried.

He nodded. The case had been postponed half a dozen times since the morning two years ago when Stan Gronowalski, eighteen years old, six feet tall and blond, had been crushed against the wall of his father's barn by the truck he was loading with potatoes. He had been left badly crippled. The trucking company had offered five hundred dollars as compensation, and this insult had brought the Gronowalskis to Walter. But the big-city lawyers had been able to keep the case from coming to trial till now. "And you didn't tell me," Martha said.

Walter smiled, forgiving her for being too busy to listen. Seeing that smile, the kind curve of his lips, she felt the impact of him with a shock of newness—his patience, his strength, his utter steadfastness. She reached out a hand.

He drew her up to stand within his enclosing arms. She opened her lips upon his cheek, and at that moment he spoke against her hair: "It will be all right."

Her breath caught in something like a laugh. "That was just what I was telling you!"

Then he was gone and the door downstairs closed once more, softly this time. She sat before her cooling soup and remembered how Walter had waited this morning, waited for something she had not given him. "I need to carry my marriage with me," he had told her early in their first year, "through a day of people versus other people."

It had touched her deeply at the time, but that was before the children came, crowding between them, postponing their moments alone together until they were too exhausted—or she was. Like last night—she remembered how he had stood watching her press the ribbon, waiting for her to feel his need of her attention, of her whole self. He always liked to talk about his cases with her before he went into court. "If your wife can't find the holes in your argument," he had once said with a grin, "it's a sure bet no jury will." But once a trial had begun, he never could discuss it. She had let him down this time.

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The doorbell rang and Dr. Joe came up the stairs. He nodded at her but saved his friendly smile for Philip. His words were gentle as he unbuttoned Phil's shirt and placed the stethoscope against his chest. His face was blank as he listened, but when he laid the boy back on the pillow he said casually, "Looks like the real thing. 'Old-fashioned pneumonia.' "

Martha gasped, childhood whispers assailing her: ". . . reached the crisis . . . failed to rally . . ."

"Of course, that's easier to deal with nowadays," Dr. Joe went on, "than the new-fashioned virus kind. We can give miracle drugs and *get* miracles usually." He was writing on his prescription pad. "I'll phone Ed Robbins, and he'll drive right over with the penicillin. If the case is typical, that temperature should do a rather spectacular dive."

After he had phoned he came partway back up the stairs. "He'll need pretty constant nursing care, you know, to keep him quiet after the fever drops. But it's important. I could get him into the hospital at Marbury if you can't handle it."

"Of course I can," she told him.

"Good." He started down. "At that age a kid is better off in his own bed. Especially at Christmas."

Christmas . . . the word echoed back to her when he had gone. Was it still the nineteenth of December?

She had never liked the local druggist, Ed Robbins—his familiar manner repelled her—but when he came bursting into the house within ten minutes, she could not speak for gratitude. "If you need anything else, just give me a buzz," he grunted. "Hot-water bottle, ice bag, anything, if I have to go to Marbury for it."

The tears must have been near the surface, for they spilled over. "Oh, thanks, Ed."

He was gone and she was tearing the package open, rousing Philip. He took his first capsule with unlikely meekness, sinking back to the pillow in relief. There was no difficulty

now, she thought grimly, in keeping him quiet. No, this was the time to finish what she could of those tasks that had been so pressing this morning. If she could only think what they were. But anxiety was like a thick fog filling her mind.

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The sound of Sandy's feet on the porch was infinitely welcome. "Can I come up?" he stage-whispered.

From the doorway she nodded. His feet clumped carefully on the stairs; total willpower could not keep those shoes really quiet. He gazed down at his little brother, his teeth biting into his lower lip. She noted how like his father's his gray eyes were, with their thick, dark lashes, the brows slashed blackly across the level forehead. Even his jaw was losing its curve and beginning to thrust out ruggedly like Walter's, daring anyone to misinterpret the dimple in the chin. "Phil looks so . . . *sick*," he whispered.

"He's had his first penicillin. There must be quite a battle starting in him. But soon he'll be needing a nurse to hold him down."

Sandy's eyes went to hers in alarm.

"I'll be the nurse." She smiled.

"Gads!" Sandy wiped his forehead. It was one of his histrionic gestures, but this time it looked real. "You had me scared. We don't want any old Starch-face around. Not at Christmas."

There was that word again, that strange and meaningless word. But not meaningless to the children. They would still be expecting, anticipating. "Sandy, I'm afraid our Christmas this year—" She groped for words to soften the blow. "Well, this has caught me with some rather important unfinished—"

"Say, speaking of which!" And Sandy went clumping down the stairs.

Kids never heard what they didn't want to hear, she thought, sighing. If only she could be that way, if only she need not hear every hasty, painful breath Phil drew! They seemed faster, shallower, and he moved restlessly on the bed. He was gasping out incoherent words that terrified her. She sponged his body—how small he was!—and dressed him in clean pajamas, but he hardly noticed.

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At last Walter came in. "I saw Sandy riding his bike through a foot of snow with a knapsack on his back, well filled. Is he off to Everest?"

"The packages!"

"The walks are cleared," Walter marveled. "Even the driveway."

"He did that at noon," Martha told him.

He took her hand, and their fingers communicated something comprehensible only to two people who had shared a two-year-old's tantrums, a six-year-old's attacks upon his sister, a ten-year-old sitter's desertion of his baby brother for a baseball game. But Sandy was thirteen now.

"That must be the zigzag course of growing up," Walter mused. "A matter of rising to occasions and then not slipping all the way back."

Philip had seemed quieter as they talked, but now he moved again. "It's nearly time for more penicillin," Martha said.

"It keeps going all night? Let's take turns."

She shook her head. "Remember Gronowalski versus Fullerton. How did it go?"

"Judge Gresham didn't seem bowled over by my opening."

"He just took pains to conceal it."

"Do you really think so?" Walter gave a good imitation of a grin. He stood. "I'll bring up the garden chaise. You can rest on it daytimes during his convalescence."

Wonderful word, she thought. But Walter was only whistling in the dark, playing a game of make-believe, pretending the agonizing doubt was all behind them.

Prilly was home, helping him bring the chaise lounge up the stairs. "Elspeth's mother came to help decorate," she chattered. "And she's going to make my costume along with Elspeth's."

"How lovely of her!" Martha had forgotten all about the costume. She must pull herself together. "If one of you will stay up here, I'll get supper."

Prilly seized her arms and pushed her awkwardly down on the chaise. "Promise you won't come *near* the kitchen till I say you can." Her slim body was rigid with intensity.

"You know how much trouble a nurse can make among the help," Walter added.

Prilly did not smile. Reigning in the kitchen had always been her dream. Martha wondered how she could have denied the boon because of anything so trivial as cleaning counters, walls, and floor. "I promise," she said. This was one gift, at least, that she could give the child.

The doorbell rang as Philip took his second capsule. From her separate, remote world upstairs Martha was aware of Mrs. Carhart's voice spraying like a fountain over Walter's low tones. But all she really heard was Philip's hasty, urgent breathing.

Walter brought her supper tray. She stared at crusty chicken pie, breathed the fragrant steam. "Mrs. Carhart brought it," Walter explained. "With good news. It seems everybody in town bought one another's cakes at fancy prices."

Martha tried to laugh, but the tears were too near the surface. Mrs. Carhart had been so petulant only six hours ago. Six hours? Six decades.

* * * * *

It seemed that the doorbell rang all evening long. The news had swept through the small town, bringing gifts and offers. *But this meant Philip's case was more serious than she had been told,* Martha thought in panic. No, Dr. Joe would never reveal any worry he felt. He would not need to; the word was enough—pneumonia.

It was after the doorbell and the phone were still, the children asleep and Walter reluctantly gone to bed—it was then that the horror started.

She looked at Philip lying quiet in his bed, quiet but for his rapid breathing, his body small beneath the covers, extending little more than halfway down the bed. Watching a five-year-old run about all day, shouting and climbing, you forget how tenuous is the hold by which a child that age clings to life.

She began to hear what Dr. Joe had really said, what she had not let herself hear when he said it. "We can get a miracle usually." *Usually*. It was like a hanging sword ready to cut off hope.

"If this case is typical . . ." *If*.

But suppose it was not. The whispers she had overheard as a child came hissing in her ears: ". . . reached the crisis . . . failed to rally . . . reached the crisis. . ."

She fought the impulse to call Dr. Joe. "Phone me if you

have any questions," he had said. Well, she had a question for him. Just one—whether her son, her baby, would live or die.

But asking the doctor would not change the answer. There was nothing for her to do now but wait. Nothing, no work for her speeding, efficient hands. No plans to fill the mind that had teemed with lists and schedules. Nothing but thoughts of how those busy hands, that busy mind, had failed her husband and her son.

At last she could give Philip another capsule. She set the alarm clock again, placed it under her pillow, and lay back on the chaise. She had not known how tired she was. She closed her aching eyes. Without losing awareness of Philip's breathing she began to dream. She was watching in fascination a broad, red satin ribbon, creased and wrinkled like a prehistoric reptile; watching in sick horror she saw it writhe and change, become sleek and shiny, like the stretched skin of some naked, snakelike animal, writhing, changing again to creases . . . wrinkles . . . She started up, her temples wet and cold, her heart racing with fear. She dared not doze again, but her waking thoughts were worse.

At three in the morning, when she knew that she had not only blighted her husband's life but sacrificed his son's, she heard Walter's step in the hall.

She went to him and pressed her shivering body close to his. "Couldn't you sleep?" she whispered.

"Not without you . . ." He held her closer. "Listen."

She stood very still. She could hardly hear Philip's breathing. It was quieter now and slower, definitely slower. She moved swiftly to lay her hand on his forehead. The skin was warm and faintly damp, as a sleeping child's should be. Her eyes met Walter's just as her knees gave way. She would have fallen but for his arm half carrying her to the chaise. He knelt beside her, his cheek against her hair. "You'll sleep now." He kissed her lips.

"You too," she murmured, and was asleep.

The alarm clock buzzed under her pillow. She sat up and blinked in the faint dawn light. But even before she was awake she heard the slow, steady rhythm of Philip's breathing. His eyes were closed, really closed, no sightless gleam between the lids; his lashes lay golden on his cheek.

She wakened him to take his capsule. This time he looked into her face. "Mommy." It was a greeting, the greeting of someone who has been away and has come back.

"Hi, Phil." She kept her arms from clutching him to her breast. "Another capsule for you. Down with it."

He stared at it, frowning in natural suspicion, all meekness gone. "Is it good?"

"Good?" She laughed. "It's wonderful."

He looked a little puzzled, but he took it with a wry, resigned half smile, so familiar, so dear, so much himself, her Phil, that she felt the impulse to run wildly down the hall opening doors, shouting the news.

He looked at the chaise. "Why are you sleeping here? Have we got company?"

"You have," she told him. "And I'm it."

His smile became a wide, delighted grin. "Truly?"

"Truly."

He reached his hand out and she held it: little and thin but no longer limp—very much alive.

The gray sky was lightening beyond the window; a flush of color warmed the east.

"Is that the sunrise?" Philip asked. "It's pretty."

"Very pretty. Shall we go back to sleep?"

He shook his head contentedly. "No. Let's talk about the sunrise."

They did not speak often, though. They lay against their pillows watching the light rise through the ragged purple clouds.

Soon they saw that the air was full of snow, large flakes drifting lazily or swirling upward in foolish whirlwinds before they settled slowly to the earth. Once, seeing a particularly frivolous burst of snowflakes, they both laughed aloud, and Philip said, "I like having company."

She was abashed suddenly before the light in his eyes, the calm serenity, the joy. It was so little she had done for him, just sitting with him, just watching snowflakes, just being with him. Yet she could not remember another time when she had simply shared time with a child, doing nothing, striving for nothing, giving nothing—nothing but herself. Nor could she remember feeling for years this strange tranquility in which she rested now.

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The alarm clock buzzed; she offered him another capsule. He swallowed and informed her, "It stinks."

"We don't say that in *this* house," Prilly crowed in the doorway, her eyebrows raised in triumphant question.

Martha nodded as she placed the thermometer firmly beneath Philip's tongue and closed his lips with her fingers.

Sandy came stumbling out of his room. "What gives?" He yawned, but his gray eyes shone brilliantly upon his brother.

"Oh, nothing," Prilly told him in her usual teasing voice. "Nothing but everything."

"His temperature is almost normal," Martha said, and had to add, "Hush—you'll wake your father."

"Father is waked, completing the family group." Walter stood grinning and posed with a hand on each older child's shoulder.

Philip studied the picture a moment. "Merry Christmas," he said.

Sandy and Prilly protested; it was not the right moment. Christmas was five days off. But Martha looked over their heads at their father. Philip was right. This *was* the moment, Christmas *would* be merry. For the first time it would be really right, and the rightness had already begun. The ritual might be made up of makeshift parts, many tasks might be performed imperfectly or left undone, the most important presents not wrapped up or even purchased, but none of those given would be without the giver.

In his convalescence Phil might be fretful. Sandy and Prilly might slip from the giddy pinnacle of their new maturity. But this night was forever theirs, their family treasure—their miracle.

She felt tears come to her eyes and looked across at Walter. It was almost as if he thought what she was thinking, for his gray eyes were lustrous, dark. In that moment of quiet, it was almost as though she could hear music swell and fill the room: "*How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given!*"

Hope Hale Davis (1903–2004), born in Iowa City, Iowa, held many positions in her long life, and was a prolific writer of short stories for magazines such as *Colliers*, *New Yorker*, *Bookman*, *Redbook*, and *Town and Country*.

Christmas on the Mayflower

Elizabeth Cady Stanton

Have you ever wondered if those ultraconservative Pilgrims dared to celebrate Christmas on that landing day, December 25, of 1620?

Wonder no longer!

* * * * *

This would be a great story for children to act out at Christmas.

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Historians take so little note of the doings of women and children that I presume not one of my readers ever heard of Christmas on the *Mayflower*; and yet the unwritten history of individuals and nations is always most interesting. I am indebted for my facts to Elizabeth Tudor Brewster, named after the queen. She was a favorite niece of Elder William Brewster, who went to Holland with the Pilgrims and lived there several years. My husband's mother was a Brewster, and into her hands came many of the private family letters, dim and yellow with time, and among others this account of Christmas.

While yet at sea, the mothers began to discuss the probabilities of reaching land by December 25, and having some little celebration for the children, as they had half a dozen on board of the right age to enjoy some holiday performances. The foremothers who came from Holland had imbibed the Dutch love for festive occasions, and were more liberal in their views than the rigid Puritans direct from England, who objected to all the legends of old Saint Nicholas. But Elder Brewster, then seventy-nine years old, and loving children tenderly, gave his vote for the celebration.

Accordingly, as they sailed up the beautiful harbor of Plymouth, the mothers were busy in their preparations for the glad day. Knowing the fondness of Indians for beads, they had brought a large box of all sizes and colors, which they were stringing for the little Indians, as they intended to invite a few of them to come on board the ship. The mothers had also brought a barrel full of ivy, holly, laurel, and immortelles,* to decorate their log cabins. Of these they made wreaths to ornament the children and the saloon.†

As soon as the *Mayflower* cast anchor, Elder Brewster and his interpreter, and as many of the fathers and mothers as the little boats would hold, went ashore to make arrangements for their cabins, to visit the squaws and invite the children. The interpreter explained to them the meaning or significance of Christmas, the custom of exchanging gifts and so forth, and they readily accepted the invitation. Massasoit was sachem [chief] of the Wampanoags at this point. The yellow fever had reduced his tribe, once estimated at thirty thousand, down to

* Everlasting plants.

† Dining cabin on a ship.