

That Was the Best Christmas!

25 Short Stories
from the
Generations

A.R. Cecil



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That Was the Best Christmas!
25 Short Stories from the Generations
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*To my children:
Corey, Kate, Claire, and Reid*

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I have saved the most important acknowledgment for last. I wish to acknowledge my husband, Joe. We have been married for forty-three years. I have been writing for the majority of those years. From the very beginning, Joe has been encouraging and supportive of my desire to share God's good news with others.

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INTRODUCTION

Christmas holds a special place in our hearts and minds. It is a time when much of the world gears up; our nation devotes at least a month to celebrating, and our cities and towns are decked with greenery, lights, and seasonal displays. Christmas carols can be heard on every street corner and in numerous shops and restaurants. Our churches center their preaching and activities around the blessed event of the birth of Jesus into a fallen world. Our families bring their treasures down from the attic or up from the basement. We prepare our homes, and then gather together. Those interactions become the settings in which the memories are made.

The first Christmas brought our Lord into the world, and his amazing grace became the enduring gift. It is fitting, therefore, that Christmas has the power to bring out the best in all of us. In the following fictional stories, you will meet many different characters—young and old—from various walks of life. Their tales are set in a particular historical time period, which plays a factor. The common thread throughout the book, though, is that something good emerged from their situations. By the grace of God, the men, women, and children in these stories rose to the occasion, claimed a gift, created a memory, and then positioned themselves to share the blessing with the generations after them.

This book serves as a reflection of God's gifts: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control" (Galatians 5:22-23). Such are the very values all godly parents work to instill in their children because they know that they are God's decrees, that these standards are the most helpful tools for children throughout their lives, and that they bring lasting joy.

That Was the Best Christmas! can become a family tradition. One story could be read on each of the twenty-five days before and embracing Christmas Day. Each of these stories has the potential to reach all ages and genders. However, some stories may appeal more

to boys and some may appeal more to girls. The list below is given as a guide for those who want to read from this book to a child. It seems to hold true that girls enjoy stories featuring both girls and boys, while boys prefer stories about boys. The stories with stars (*) below them are probably best for girls.

In 2001, the title character of “Emma in the Middle” learned the real meaning of Christmas. Mr. Johnson, a history professor, spoke the truth to her. “But rest assured, my dear little Emma,” he shared, “that all mankind will know God’s victory at the end of time. ‘Every knee will bow.’” Surround yourself and your loved ones with “the belt of truth” (Ephesians 6:14); feed upon the bread of the good news; and live in peace and joy because our risen Savior came that first Christmas Day.

LIST FOR READING TO CHILDREN ONE-ON-ONE

- * 1. Anna’s Fleece
- 2. Christmas Reborn
- * 3. Taking the Gospel to Miss Hattie Mae
- * 4. Betsy, Madeline, and Nora
- 5. Tanner’s Quilt
- * 6. Two Plates Short
- 7. The Button Jar
- 8. Enough Said
- 10. The Thorn in Every Christmas
- * 11. Beyond the Garden Gate
- 12. Mr. Henry Milburn
- 13. Mashed Potatoes
- 15. Mrs. Garcia Sits
- 17. Gray Lady
- * 18. The Dream Maker
- 20. Christmas with Grandpa
- * 22. Emma in the Middle
- 25. Memories

~ 1 ~
ANNA'S FLEECE
1906



The Gift of a Father's Love

“And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love” (1 Corinthians 13:13).

Anna entered Mrs. Foster's life when she was six years old. It was 1906. Anna and her father, Carl, landed on Ellis Island that summer. Carl had been a lumberjack in Sweden, so when he saw the small box on the “Want Ads” page of *The New York Times*, he felt it had been placed there by the hand of God.

LUMBERJACKS NEEDED
to supply timber for the rebuilding of San Francisco after the earthquake of April 18, 1906. BELLINGHAM LUMBERYARD. Bellingham, Washington. Will pay for travel expenses. Telegraph to say you are coming.

Carl had brought Anna to America in an effort to remove himself as far as possible from anything that would remind him

of his beloved wife, Marta. He had left Marta and their newborn son in the cold earth of northern Sweden. Then, after two weeks on a ship that rocked and pitched with every wave, Carl and Anna were standing on American soil. The state of Washington, however, was on the other side of the United States. Carl looked down at his little daughter. She was already weary, but he could not resist putting more distance between himself and his memories. Carl was well aware of the fact that he could not leave everything behind that reminded him of Marta; Anna was a miniature of her mother, and it was impossible to look into Anna's eyes and not see Marta there.

Anna also brought something of her past to the New World. She brought the wool afghan that Marta had knitted for her when she was a baby. When Anna wrapped herself up in the afghan, she felt as if she was wrapping herself in her mother's arms. The fleece was all that remained of Marta for Anna, and Anna clung to it.

For five days and four nights Carl and Anna felt the constant vibration of the train against their legs and backs as it chugged along. Watching out the window, Anna saw a land of varied terrains and vegetations. The rising sun of each new day revealed a different panoramic splendor. Finally they arrived at the other end of the world (so Anna thought). After they exited the passenger coach and stepped off the train, the first thing they did was find the lumberyard. Carl signed on and was compensated for half of the expenses of his journey. "The rest will come after you have worked for a month," the clerk gruffly informed Carl.

"Come, Anna," Carl said. "We need to find a home." Anna was so tired. She just wanted to sit down right there and never move again. Somehow, however, she found it within herself to rally and endure one more leg of their journey—a hike to find a home. They aimlessly wandered through the town, up and down side streets; Carl was too proud to ask for assistance. Finally, they happened upon a neat, two-story clapboard house with bright green shutters. A large sign on the front lawn read: "Daily Linens. Three Square Meals. \$3.00 a Week for One Room. \$5.00 for

Two Rooms.” From the minute Carl and Anna stepped through the door of Mrs. Foster’s boarding house, the job of mothering Anna became Mrs. Foster’s responsibility. She had raised four children of her own and felt too old to do it all over again. However, Mrs. Foster knew the Lord had sent this child into her life, and he would give her the needed strength.

Carl immersed himself in his work, laboring like a man possessed, as if the perspiration that poured from his pores could cleanse his inner being of hurt and pain. He came home exhausted every night, wolfed down one of Mrs. Foster’s meals, grabbed the newspaper, and went up to his room. Carl might place his big, calloused hand on Anna’s head on his way up the stairs and say, “Good night, Anna.” But he never looked into her eyes, or said, “I love you,” because those words might draw Anna to him. Carl needed to keep a distance between the two of them.

Mrs. Foster groaned within herself, but she felt powerless to intervene. Perhaps she could be the mother Anna needed, but she knew Anna needed a father’s love, too.

Every night before bed, Anna snuggled under her afghan while Mrs. Foster read from the Bible. It was three nights before Christmas, and Mrs. Foster was reading the story of Gideon and the fleece from Judges 6:36-40:

Gideon said to God, ‘If you will save Israel by my hand as you have promised—look, I will place a wool fleece on the threshing floor. If there is dew only on the fleece and all the ground is dry, then I will know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you said.’ And that is what happened. Gideon rose early the next day; he squeezed the fleece and wrung out the dew—a bowlful of water.

Then Gideon said to God, ‘Do not be angry with me. Let me make just one more request. Allow me one more test with the fleece. This time make the fleece dry and the ground covered with dew.’ That night God did so. Only the fleece was dry; all the ground was covered with dew.

When Mrs. Foster finished, Anna asked, "Is that the way God answers prayer?"

"It was God's way for Gideon," Mrs. Foster replied. "Now say your prayers and go to sleep. We only have two days left before Christmas. We will need to work hard in order to be ready. Good night, Anna. I love you."

"Good night, Mrs. Foster. I love you, too," Anna responded. Then she added the words that always broke Mrs. Foster's heart. "Tell Father I love him."

"I will, darling," Mrs. Foster promised.

Mrs. Foster stopped by Carl's door every night, knocked, and waited for a reply. But every night there was no answer. Then, so she could be true to her word, Mrs. Foster called through the closed door, "Anna sends her love."

The next morning Anna came down around eight. All the other boarders were adults and had left for their day of work. Anna was looking forward to her day alone with Mrs. Foster and Miss Lillian, the housekeeper. The three of them were going to make Christmas cookies together. To Anna's delight, the task of holiday baking was first on Mrs. Foster's list. When each tree, star, and Santa was cool, it received a coat of red, green, or blue icing.

Next on the list were two more enjoyable jobs: decorate the mantel and staircase with garlands and place holly around the candles. It was a good day. Evening shadows began to play across the yard, and out of them Anna's father emerged. His presence broke the magical spell. Anna, however, was distracted by a plan she had set in motion, so preoccupied that her father's withdrawn spirit was less offensive this night.

Mrs. Foster and Anna carried out the nighttime ritual as usual, and then Anna snuggled under her covers. Fortunately, Mrs. Foster did not notice that the afghan was missing from its usual place on top of the stack of covers.

"My, if I didn't know, I'd think tomorrow was Christmas instead of Christmas Eve!" Mrs. Foster exclaimed. "I do believe I see sugar plums dancing in your head!"

Anna smiled at the notion. “Well, it is the eve of Christmas Eve!” She giggled, then added, “Tell Father I love him.”

“Yes, dear, I will,” Mrs. Foster said and left Anna’s room.

The next morning, Anna came downstairs at 9:15.

“Good morning, sleepyhead,” Mrs. Foster teased. “Every day you are sleeping in a little later. Why, by the time you are due to go back to school, you’ll be tumbling out of bed at ten.” Anna sat at the big, round oak table in the kitchen, digesting Mrs. Foster’s words while she stirred her hot cereal. She was trying to wake up, when all of a sudden she remembered something.

She bolted from her chair and out the back door. Mrs. Foster followed at a distance to see where Anna was going in such a hurry. Anna ran to a place next to the garden. Her afghan lay stretched out on the ground.

Anna picked it up and hugged it to herself, crying, “It’s wet! It’s wet!” Then she ran her hand over the grass and exclaimed, “The grass is dry!” Anna was right: The dew still clung to the heavy, wool afghan, but the sun and wind had already dried the grass.

“What does it mean, dear?” Mrs. Foster asked, coming up to her.

“It means my father is going to give me the gift I want this Christmas.”

“What gift is that, Anna?”

“The gift of his *kärlek*,” Anna responded.

“English, Anna. Speak in English,” Mrs. Foster gently coaxed.

“Love. Father is going to give me his love.”

As Anna cried for joy, Mrs. Foster fought back tears of sadness and anger. “Come, Anna. Let’s go back into the house, so you can finish your breakfast,” Mrs. Foster said as she retrieved the afghan from Anna and hung it on the line to dry. While Mrs. Foster strolled along with her hand in Anna’s, she was deep in thought.

Anna returned to the table and her neglected—now cold—bowl of cereal, but Mrs. Foster wrapped her shawl around herself. “Anna and Lillian, I’ll be leaving,” she declared. “There is an errand that needs my attention.”

The long, brisk walk to the lumberyard gave Mrs. Foster time to calm down and collect her thoughts. She was a meek, little woman, but a lion had been awakened within her.

At Mrs. Foster's request, Carl was summoned from his work. The two of them—the slight, old woman and the tall, burly man—stood in the sunlight among the buzz of saws and the clang of cranes. Mrs. Foster did all the talking. Then she turned and went back home.

When Carl returned from work, that evening was the same as all the previous ones—to Mrs. Foster's great disappoint. At bedtime, she tucked Anna in for the night as usual. Anna's afghan was missing again, and Mrs. Foster's heart sank. She was quite sure Anna had taken it outside and placed it on the grass by the rose garden in the same way that she had done the night before. To confirm her suspicions, Mrs. Foster said casually, "So, I see you are carrying out the second test with the fleece."

"Yes!" replied Anna.

"Well, if it doesn't work out, we can talk about it tomorrow after breakfast, just you and me."

"It will work out," Anna stated with all the faith in the world.

"We'll see. Now go to sleep. Tomorrow is Christmas Day!"

Mrs. Foster and Anna said good-night and Mrs. Foster left Anna's room. She went down the hall to Carl's room and started to knock on the door to deliver Anna's message when she noticed the door was ajar. She lightly tapped and called Carl's name. When he did not answer, she timidly pushed open the door and looked into the room. Carl was not there.

She entered and crossed the room. A movement outside the window caught her attention. She looked out and saw Carl kneeling on the ground in the moonlight. She watched as he placed a stone from the flower bed at each corner of Anna's outstretched afghan. Then he removed the afghan and replaced it with a layer of newspapers. To hold the papers in place, Carl added more stones. When all this was finished, he gathered up the afghan and carried it into the house.

When Mrs. Foster came downstairs the next morning, she

found Carl already sitting at the table, sipping a cup of coffee.

“Hope you don’t mind; I started the coffee this morning,” he said.

Mrs. Foster knew Carl had already been in the yard that morning. His shoes were wet, and she saw the wet newspapers bulging from the trash bin. She looked out the window into the backyard and noted that the afghan was back on the dry area of ground where the newspapers had lain during the night. The afghan was dry, of course, because it had set on the kitchen table all night; Mrs. Foster had seen it when she locked up the house last night after everyone else had retired.

“I’m going to wake up Anna early this morning,” Carl said.

Mrs. Foster knew the reason: The dew was still on the grass. “Good idea,” she said.

Soon, Carl returned to the kitchen with a very sleepy Anna still in her nightgown.

“Merry Christmas, Anna,” said Mrs. Foster.

“Merry Christmas,” replied Anna, yawning.

No sooner was the yawn out of her mouth than Anna’s face lit up as she remembered! Without a word, she went outside. Soon she reappeared at the door. Her feet and the edge of her gown were wet with dew, but the afghan in her arms was dry. Her face beamed as she went to her father’s side at the kitchen table.

Carl looked into Anna’s eyes. There he saw Marta, but he also saw Anna. He reached out and drew Anna into his arms.

“Merry Christmas, Anna,” Carl said. “All my *kärlek* I give to you, Anna—my dear, sweet reminder of God’s love.”



Under the care of Mrs. Foster and in the light of her father’s love, Anna grew into a lovely lady. She married, settled in Seattle, and gave Carl five grandchildren, who dearly love their *morfär* (Swedish for *grandfather*). The gift of a father’s love, given on Christmas day in 1906, set the stage for all the generations since.

~2~
CHRISTMAS REBORN
1908



The Gift of Kindness

“When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me” (1 Corinthians 13:11).

U ntil the age of twelve, Joseph Wakefield possessed a soul of wonder and delight for every garland hung and every candle lit. However, the light in his eyes went out the Christmas of 1908; and no matter how hard his mother and father tried to bring it back, the spirit of Christmas was gone from their oldest child.

One Sunday during the fall of that year, Joseph, Jane, Lily, and Andrew—the family’s four fidgety children—sat on the pew with their mother and father. Andrew was in Mother’s lap; Jane sat next to Father, who was on Mother’s right; and on Mother’s left was Joseph with Lily by his side. Since Joseph was Lily’s favorite, she responded better to his instruction than she did to her parents’. Joseph tugged on Mother’s arm, and her first thought was that he needed help with Lily, but he gestured

toward Old Man Edwards and his wife coming down the aisle. "Old Man" was not a very respectful name, but it was truly his name. At first Joseph's parents balked at using it but, when people didn't understand to whom they were referring, they began calling him "Old Man" like everyone else did.

Old Man Edwards and his wife were lifetime members of the small church on the outskirts of Baltimore (a current map would place the church well within the city limits). Mr. and Mrs. Edwards were as poor as church mice. They owned a small strip of land adjacent to the Wakefield family and barely made ends meet by living off of it. That morning, they were not alone as usual. With them were a tall young man, his wife, and three little children. The two boys appeared to be about eight and three. The girl was probably five years old. After the service, a small group of members from the church stood around and talked. They learned that the man was the grandson of Mr. and Mrs. Edwards. He had lost his job up north and, having no place else to turn, had moved in with his grandparents.

Now seven people were living off that small strip of land. Joseph wondered where they were all sleeping in that tiny house and what kind of assistance they might need. Joseph was also curious if Old Man Edwards would let anyone help him. In all the years that Joseph had known him, Old Man Edwards had prided himself on managing on his own. He had raised four sons with no outside help.

Joseph intently listened to the entire conversation of those who had gathered outside after the service to discuss these new members of their congregation and their circumstance. He had an invested interest since he had become a friend of Old Man Edwards while fishing with him at a pond near his house. Old Man Edwards enjoyed Joseph's companionship because his sons were all grown, married, and lived away. Old Man Edwards was a very prideful man. Rumor had it that his pride had created a barrier between him and his sons. But now a grandson and his family had entered his life. Joseph, like many others, was eager to learn if the crisis had softened the heart of Old Man Edwards.

Through the grapevine in the days to follow, Joseph heard that Pastor Harris had called on Old Man and Mrs. Edwards. The report came back that they were managing on their own and did not want any help.

Joseph continued to occasionally fish with Old Man Edwards, but he never came home with any fish. When his mother asked why his fishing trips never yielded any fish, Joseph remarked in passing, "Oh, I give them to Old Man Edwards."

"I'm surprised he accepts them," Mother commented.

Joseph smiled a very mischievous grin and answered, "I pretend I don't want them and I'm going to throw them back, and then he takes them."

The days grew shorter and colder. December came, and with it the preparations for Christmas. The house was decorated with fresh-cut greenery from the hills behind the Wakefield's home. Delectable baked goods filled the shelves of the sideboard. The Wakefield family might not have had many presents—nobody did in those days. The established tradition in their family was that Santa brought three presents to each child.

The children's lists started coming in as early as late November. Joseph had been particularly slow that year about giving his list to his mother; it was as if he didn't want to think about it. She cornered him several times and tried to pin him down, but every time he simply answered, "I just need a little more time to think about what I want for Christmas."

Mother prayed for Joseph, and one day decided to have a talk with him. "Joseph, the time has come in your life when the primary focus of Christmas is no longer one as a receiver of gifts from Santa," she explained. "When that happens, it is time to focus on the true meaning of Christmas. You've always been taught that Jesus is the true meaning, and now it is time to live out that meaning in your life."

Several days after Mother's talk, Joseph bounded down the stairs and waltzed up to her, waving a piece of paper in the air. "Here," he declared.

Mother took the paper and adjusted her glasses. It was Joseph's Christmas list!

Joseph wanted a set of twelve wooden soldiers and a canon; a clown marionette; and a brown teddy bear with a big, red bow. Theodore ("Teddy") Roosevelt had recently made teddy bears popular. While on a hunting trip in early November of 1902, the President had refused to shoot a captured bear that was tied to a willow tree. "Unsportsmanlike," said the President. On November 16, *The Washington Post* published a political cartoon depicting the incident and, by 1906, teddy bears were the craze.

"Joseph?" Father questioned. "Aren't you too old for a teddy bear?"

"Please, Father," Joseph begged. "They are a bit of the history in which I am living."

Father and Mother discussed buying Joseph a bear and finally agreed no harm could come honoring Joseph's Christmas list with one. "How can we deny Joseph his 'bit of history'?" Father concluded with a chuckle. Ever since Joseph handed his mother the list, his mood changed; he was excited about Christmas. He helped prepare for the upcoming day with the enthusiasm of a small child. It was good to have their old Joseph back.

The Sunday before Christmas, the Wakefield family went up in the hills and chopped down a tree. Joseph got excited about a small one and asked his father to please cut it down for him. Father consented, thinking Joseph was going to use the branches for some additional decorating. But he was wrong. After dragging it home, Joseph fashioned a stand for it out of planks from an old fence Father had torn down in the summer. Then he attached the stand to the bottom of the tree. It was meant to be a Christmas tree, but Joseph left it outside the back door.

The family decorated the big tree with all their ornaments. Since birth, each child had been given one ornament every year. Joseph's twelve were nestled in the branches with nine, six, and two others, making a total of twenty-nine plus a few Father and Mother had purchased before the children were born.

Christmas Eve finally arrived. Father built a large fire in the

fireplace and popped corn. The children made popcorn strings for the tree. Joseph insisted on making a string of his own. He worked so feverishly that he soon constructed one that was twelve feet long. By nine o'clock, all the children—except Joseph—had gone up to bed. He hung around until Father ordered him to retire for the night. Joseph gave his mother and father each a big kiss and hug, and then ascended the stairs two at a time; his long legs were not going to conform to the short risers.

Father and Mother enjoyed playing Mr. and Mrs. Santa Claus. Mother filled the stockings. Each child received an apple, an orange, a banana, a handful of small candies and nuts, and one large candy cane. Father brought the presents out of hiding. They were unwrapped as was the custom back then. Mother and Father sat near the fire until it burned low and then went to bed.

They hadn't been in bed long—although Father was already snoring—when Mother heard the back screen door bang in response to a sudden wind storm. Had they forgotten to latch the hook on the door? *Hmmm*, Mother thought. *I am almost positive I hooked the door after I finished the supper dishes.* Mother put on her robe and slippers and went downstairs, where she quickly surveyed the rooms. Everything looked fine. Then she went into the kitchen. The door was indeed unlatched, so she slipped the hook into the eyehook.

Mother went back upstairs and checked each bedroom. Jane and Lily were fast asleep in their room. Andrew was deep in slumber in the nursery. Then she entered Joseph's room. She couldn't make out his form under the covers, so she moved closer for a better look. Still Mother could not see Joseph under the bedding, so she pulled back the quilt. Mother found Joseph's pillow minus its pillowcase. She gasped and hurried to alert Father. They searched downstairs to try to find any clues that might help them understand the reason for Joseph's disappearance. Upon careful inspection, they found that Joseph's presents were no longer under the tree. His twelve ornaments were missing, and the popcorn string he had made was gone.

His stocking was empty except for the one large candy cane.

Father unlatched the back door and looked out into the yard. The small Christmas tree was no longer there; it had been dragged through the snow, making a track across the yard and beyond. Father and Mother sat in the parlor next to the red embers because it was the warmest place in the house, and they did the only thing they knew to do—wait.

Less than an hour later the back screen door creaked on its hinges. They rushed to the kitchen and found Joseph, red-faced and breathless, standing at the door with his empty pillowcase dragging on the floor. . . .

. . . Continued in the book: "That Was the Best Christmas!"
by A.R. Cecil

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