THERE'LL ALWAYS BE CHRISTMAS
By Mrs. Paul E. King

From where I sat in the kitchen reading a book, I was brought suddenly out of my travels with Pinta, the black-haired Indian girl, to the far end of our big farmhouse kitchen and Mama's voice: "We'll want to do something;" she said to Papa, who looked both tired and perplexed, "after all, it is Christmas," she added faintly.
Papa's voice was soft and well-modulated and, peeking over the cover of my book, I was sure I saw a tear in his eye. Gesturing frantically with his calloused, work-worn hands, he said, "If only the house interest hadn't come due right now! But I'll see what I can do, Mildred. Like you said, it is Christmas time . . . ." And his voice faded with the trailing sentence.

Excitement tingled in my veins; it ran up and down my spine until I couldn't concentrate on the adventures of Pinta who had become a heroine in my mind before I had overheard the more-exciting conversation between Mama and Papa. I tried to read; to once again lose myself with Pinta and her young, exciting life among her roving tribe, living as carefree and unattached to "things" as the deer and antelope were. But the magic was gone; it had faded and paled with Papa's words. "I'll see what I can do. Like you said, it is Christmas time . . . ."

I closed the book and slid off the hinged lid of the long, deep, wide toy chest-wood box and stood up, dropping my book on top of the enormous home-made chest-box. One side served as a repository for our home-made toys, the other side of the divider concealed armload after armload of carefully-cut lengths of stove wood for the large, black kitchen cook stove's ever-hungry cavity.

I was bursting with excitement; I wanted to say something to Papa and Mama about Christmas . . . how Mrs. Cummerfield had her tree up and had it trimmed with strings of cherry-red cranberries and big plump popcorn kernels popped to cottony-whiteness, with half a dozen or more scarlet-red candles in small dainty candle holders perched on the edges of some of the stouter branches waiting to be lighted on Christmas Eve, reminding their family, like Martin Luther said, that Jesus was and is the Light of the world. But I didn't; I just stood and thought.

I wanted to tell Papa that Edmund Stowie told our John that he saw a beautiful new red wagon and a big new sled with shiny-bright, satin-smooth runners in his Papa's workshop, each still in its box, and that he, Edmund, was sure the sled was for him and the wagon for his little brother. But I didn't say a word; I couldn't: our Papa was too poor to buy anything so expensive and costly. I couldn't hurt him with comparisons! So I just stood there, silent but excited. Christmas was a wonderful time of the year, I thought, even if there were no expensive gifts.
"Ruthie, run up to the attic and bring a pan of popcorn down," Mama said kindly to me, bringing me quickly out of my world of enchantment and day dreams to the immediate present. "Take Papa's lantern," she added. "It's dark up in the attic."

I shivered. The attic was not my favorite place to be at night. But I obeyed. Taking the lantern which Papa had lit, I started up the steps to the upstairs. On a wash stand in the hallway a coal-oil lamp cast its warm, soft glow of light on my pathway, chasing the dark shadows of night into corners and filing the long hallway with a mellow, golden-yellow glow.

Holding the handle of the red lantern ever so carefully and praying silently for courage to proceed to the next floor, I lifted the latch on the attic door and stepped inside on the landing. Then, taking a long, big, deep breath, I started up the steps; ten of them, there were, I know; I counted them every time I went up them.

How dark and frightening the attic was at night! I suddenly though of Pinta, and wondered how brave and courageous she would have been had she been sent up to an attic (after popcorn) alone at night. Her adventures and exploits were outdoors; out where eyes became accustomed to the oncoming darkness by a gradually-sinking sun and a slowly-rising moon.

I swung the lantern in front of me, holding it high, trying to peer into the corners where chests and boxes were pushed and stacked. My head bumped a bundle of tea hung from the rafters up-side-down by a strand of cord. I almost let out a wild scream. Only the dry rattle of the leaves prevented the scream: I realized just in time that dry teas can not harm you.

Trembling with fear, I walked across the attic floor till I came to the big cans of stored popcorn. Lifting the lid off a can, I filled the pan which Mama had sent up with me. Then, securing the lid on the can again, I started for the steps. The attic had odors uniquely and distinctly its own, and in the clear light of broad daylight I would have lingered, fascinated with both the sight and the smells of the place. So I hurried toward the steps, trying to sing about God taking care of me and being extra careful not to trip over one of the many crocks of covered apple butter and pudding sausage which stood like stoic soldiers in rank in row after long row on the floor.
I sighed with relief when I reached the bottom landing and had clicked the latch back into place. Then I bowed my head and thanked Jesus for going with me after the popcorn. Feeling like I was, in a way, every bit as brave as Pinta, I took the pan of corn to Mama.

"You're a good girl, Ruthie," Mama commented and complimented as she took the filled pan and handed the lantern to Papa who blew the light out with one single blow.

Calling the children around her then, Mama said, "Now we're all going to shell popcorn. How would you like some popcorn to eat? and maybe some popcorn balls too?"

All six of us clapped our hands with delight and joy. Mama and Papa were so good to us; so kind. Poor, we were, but deprived of love, never!

The evening passed with no more mention of Christmas, and when we'd had family prayer and I was upstairs dressing for bed, I pulled the curtains aside and looked up to the sky where stars twinkled and danced like diamonds sparkling under a bright light. The glory of Christmas seemed to be written in the sky. Almost, I could hear the Angels tell of the birth of Jesus and see their shiny-bright garments as they hovered overhead. I was awe-struck, so real was the Biblical account to my heart.

I crawled into bed between Hannah and Jenny and lay for a long time thinking about Jesus: Was He warm enough that night, wrapped in His swaddling clothes? Why couldn't someone have given Him their bed? Did He ever cry? Ever?

Then I remembered Mama's answer to Philip when he had asked her almost the same things that I was wondering about now: "Jesus was very human," Mama had told her oldest son. "He ate, slept, cried, walked and talked like we do. But He was Divine, Philip. He was and is God. He was human and Divine; the God-man; our Saviour."

Perhaps I couldn't understand it all but I believed it completely and fully. With these thoughts, I was soon asleep.

The days that followed were filled with excitement. We had our Christmas program at school and I was an angel. Philip was a shepherd and
so was John. Baby Matthew was laid in the manger like Jesus was, and when he wouldn't stop crying for "Mary" . . . Rachael Howitzer . . . and Mama had to go to the platform to pat him and quiet him, I was sure I understood more about the "humanity" part of Jesus which Mama had mentioned to Philip. It made me love Jesus more than ever, to think that He, being God's Son, would come down to earth to be my Saviour. Oh, I was so glad I had given my heart to Him. It wasn't much that I could give; but I gave Him what I could and what He wanted . . . my heart.

After the Christmas program, we all sang carols. Oh, such singing; such beautiful, beautiful blending of voices, old and young! I closed my eyes and wondered if maybe Heaven wouldn't be something like this. Then the teacher called each of his pupils in that little red brick one-room school house up to the front and gave us an apple, an orange and a small box of candy.

I looked with wonder and amazement at the treasures in my hands. They were almost more than small hands could hold and I felt suddenly very, very rich and blest. I looked back toward Mama and saw happy tears of joy in her eyes. Papa, too, was crying. At least he was wiping his eyes with his big handkerchief. I smiled at both of them. Then we were dismissed with prayer by our wonderful, stern teacher.

All the way home, in the sleigh pulled by Bill and Pet, the team of Percherons, Papa and Mama talked about the beautiful Christmas program and the enjoyable carol-sing. Then Papa, in his clear bell-like tenor voice, began singing-Silent Night. Next Mama added a beautiful contralto. Then, from the rear of the sleigh, five children's voices served as a back-drop for the lovely duet coming from the front seat of the horse-drawn vehicle. In his thick wool blanket and homemade quilt, baby Matthew slept peacefully in Mama's arms, totally oblivious and unaware of the song floating out across the valley on the still night air.

Two days before Christmas, Mama had me push the big black iron frying pan back and forth across the hot lids of the coal-burning, wood-burning cookstove. The pan held popcorn in its bottom. As the kernels popped and the lid was forced upward with the increased volume of the popped corn, some of the fluffy-white goodies escaped, making unexpected landings anywhere they chose in the kitchen, much to the delight of each of us, Matthew especially.
When enough corn had been popped, each of us was given a threaded needle to string the puffy-fluffy white kernels into garlands which Mama draped gracefully around evergreen festooned doorways and windows, transforming our house into a young child's sort of fairyland dream house. Oh, it was beautiful! And it smelled wonderful too; all piney and woodsy. I wondered where the evergreens had come from and Mama, seeming to read my thoughts, very casually and matter-of-factly told us that old Thomas Chalfrey had driven by with a big load of the fragrant boughs on his sled, wondering if she and Papa could use them, seeing it was so near Christmas eve.

"That was most kind of Mr. Chalfrey," I remarked to Mama as I handed her another popcorn garland, remembering, at the same time, all the meals Mama had sent to the widower by way of John or Philip. So it worked like this, I thought, smiling as light dawned on my brain and in my heart . . . kindness begat kindness just as love begets love. Yes, this was the beautiful formula-equation, as old as the Bible itself: "Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do you even so to them likewise." Mama and Papa had treated Mr. Chalfrey most kindly and now that kindness was returning to them in a way that was a joy to all of us.

Something was born in my heart that day; something I would never forget and which I would put into practice for the rest of my life . . . the principles of Christian charity and kindness. My Papa and Mama instilled it in my heart by practice; the Lord Jesus Christ wrote it deep inside me by His love shed abroad in my heart. I felt happy all over; through and through, happy.

We made popcorn balls that night, and as we shaped them (between bites of the deliciously-sticky concoction going into our mouths) Mama placed them carefully between layers of wax paper in the enormous dark-blue enameled roaster pan for Christmas Day. Vinegar taffy was boiled to the necessary hardness then stretched into long, slender taffy-ropes and cut into bite-size pieces for our Christmas Day enjoyment and eating pleasure. Our house smelled sweetly: fragrant, and delicious. As we climbed the steps for bed after family prayers, we went with a warm feeling of security and of being loved. Sleep overcame us immediately.

Christmas Eve arrived with a dusting of fresh snow and a thin, brittle-crisp wind. Dressed in heavy woolen coats, caps and gloves, we hurried
outside to the waiting sleigh where Papa sat like a dignified knight on the seat, waiting to take us to the church and the Christmas Eve service there.

"Aren't we early?" I asked from the back of the sleigh.

Mama turned her head and looked at us. Then she smiled. "We thought you children may want to get a peek inside Foster's General Store before church begins," she answered softly. "There's ever so many things to see. And they are staying open till nine tonight, Papa says."

If we had been cold before the announcement and were huddled together in the bed of the sleigh like cattle on a bitter-cold night, Mama's words electrified us. Suddenly we forgot the biting, brittle-cold; forgot that already our much-worn boots and too-thin stockings had let the winter inside on our feet; forgot that this was Christmas Eve and for us, perhaps, there would be no presents this year. Little matter; tonight . . . oh, blissful thought! . . . tonight we could see the beautiful presents in row upon long row and counter after long counter in Foster's General Store in the little town where the church sat piously and sedately on the far corner of Main and Miller Streets. I felt warm all over; even in my feet.

Bill and Pet pulled the sleigh smoothly over the beautiful snow. Their frosty manes glistened in the white light of winter and their breath came out of their nostrils in great gray smoke-like vapors. Like Papa, they looked elegant. Pompous too, I thought, sitting erect and watching as the little town kept getting closer and closer to us; or us to it.

Papa did's need to urge us out of the sleigh when Foster's Store came into full view; no indeed. In a flash, the back of the sleigh was empty. Once out, with our feet on the ground, I stood as one mesmerized. Never had I seen more beautiful lights. All around the big, long porch of the store, they danced and shimmered and sparkled from beneath heavy garlands of evergreens. Around the pillared-posts of the porch, too. I gasped. Clapping my mittened hands together ecstatically, I cried, "Oh, Mama, Papa, they're beautiful. Beautiful!"

Papa hitched the horses to a hitching post then stood back and smiled broadly at me. "They are pretty, aren't they, Ruthie?" he said.
Mama patted my head with her hand then led me up the steps to the
door. "We'll go inside now," she declared grandly, her voice hinting at,"There's grander things inside even!"

A tinkly bell announced our arrival, sort of like it was letting us know we
were truly welcome to step inside. Again I stopped, fascinated. Was this real? Really real? I dared to wonder. Again Mama's voice challenged me to the
reality of it all. Taking my hand in one of hers, she urged me down the wide
center aisle of the store. "Come Ruthie," she prodded gently, "we want to
look; remember? Already Hannah and Jenny are waiting for us. See?"

"I'm sorry Mama," I apologized softly. "But everything's so beautiful.
Where's Matthew? Who has Matthew?" I cried suddenly, not seeing him in
Mama's arms.

"Papa has the baby. And Philip and John, too," she added quickly.
"Girls," she said, addressing all three of us, "you are only to look; don't touch.
Do you understand?"

Jenny and Hannah and I all nodded our heads then we started down
the aisle, Mama close by us, listening to our cries of delight and glee over
tiny celluloid dolls lying on soft cotton beds in their equally-tiny boxes of
cardboard.

"Oh Hannah, Ruthie, look what I fond!" Jenny exclaimed in a delighted
Oh, those beautiful, beautiful colored pictures on it!"

"And see these crayons!" Hannah answered, equally excited and
happy. "Aren't they just beautiful to look at? And did you ever see so many in
one box! And here's a color book too. Oh, isn't everything lovely!"

"It is lovely," I admitted in my half-whispered voice, "but I still think
those tiny dolls are loveliest of all. Why, Hannah and Jenny, they look like
they're saying, 'Take me home with you; I love you.'"

Hannah was silent for a minute, then she said, "Yes, they do, don't they
Ruthie? Oh, I love those tiny little dolls too. The one in the blue dress,
especially."
"I like the one in yellow," Jenny half-whispered.

"I think the pink dress is prettiest of all," I said, voicing my opinion as we moved, dream-like, down the aisle, seeing things not even our wildest, fondest imagination dared hope for.

Papa and the boys met us at the far end of the first aisle then and, winking at Mama, he said, "Well, are you ready to go, little ones?"

"Oh Papa, everything is so beautiful!" I chimed up. "Thank you for bringing us."

"Yes, thank you, Papa," Hannah and Jenny added jubilantly.

"Well, look down the next aisle," Papa said, smiling. "I want to talk to your Mama, and Matthew's restless in my arms too. Nothing like a mother's arms for a baby. Now remember, see but don't touch. You boys neither!"

"We won't, Papa. We won't!" We promised as we turned the corner and started down the opposite side of the high-contered aisle.

Philip found a wrench along one wall which he declared he'd get for Papa if he had enough money, and John found the "perfect" bowl for Mama's special fruit salad. It was fluted with a solid gold edge and had beautiful hand-painted pink and yellow rose buds blooming all around its periphery. John had a flair for expensive things, I decided mentally. Maybe someday he would be a merchant!

"When I get big," he was saying, "and have my own money, Mama shall have a bowl like this."

It was stated with such emphasis and meaning that I was sure that Mama would one day have that very bowl, or one like it.

We lingered over tallow candles in deep bins, washboards hanging from walls, pitchers and creamers on shelves, Evening in Paris perfumes, and dusting powders in big cans, to nuts and bolts and nails of every conceivable size and shape, and bone hair pins, finally coming into the grocery store and meat and cheese counter, where barrels stood like stocky
mensentinels, holding briny-sour fat dill pickles, pickled herring, peanut butter, sugar, flour and nuts.

"Someday maybe I'll own a store like this," Philip said with a far-away look in his eyes. "Just think of it, Papa and Mama and all of you could have anything you wanted to eat whenever you wanted it."

"And that must mean you are hungry," Papa said, coming up behind us and cutting into a ring of the home-made beef bologna which he had bought. "Here, Philip," he said, handing his eldest a generous piece of the delicious German bologna. "And you, John: now Hannah, and Jenny and Ruth. The rest we'll save for Mama and for when we get home."

Papa kept us occupied for a while longer then Mama appeared in the doorway. "It's getting almost church time," she announced with a smile. We hurried outside and got into the sleigh.

I felt warm and good all over and as we left the beautiful store with its myriad colored lights, I was sure they were winking at us and wishing us a wonderful Christmas.

The church was warm; the service blest of God, and when we were snugly tucked in bed at home, I knew this had to be the most wonderful Christmas Eve I had ever had. Jesus was very real to me. But then, why shouldn't He be? He was living in my heart.

It was the boys' excited squeals of joy that made Hannah and Jenny and I jump out of bed and get dressed then hurry downstairs on Christmas morning.

"See what was at my plate!" John exclaimed, holding up a slate and a box of chalk and an eraser.

"And look at my pocket knife!" Philip cried. "Can I ever carve and whittle now."

Suddenly noticing the beautiful evergreen garlands around each plate and a package in the center of the plate, I squealed with delight. "The doll! The doll! Oh, look! Look! And she's wearing the pink dress too!"
"And mine has the blue dress!" Hannah cried, hugging doll, box and all to her bosom.

"Oh, How beautiful is my dolly!" Jenny exclaimed, holding up the tiny celluloid doll with the yellow dress. "Mama and Papa are so good to us!"

"And Just think of all the money it cost them! Our dolls were ten cents each!" Hanna declared. "I saw it on one of the boxes."

"That's thirty cents!" I exclaimed as I put my simple addition into practice. "O look, here's the Bible picture story book and the crayons too."

"They love us very much," Philip said tenderly.

"That we do," came Papa's voice from the stairway, followed by Mama and Matthew. "And never forget -- never -- that it is not the gifts, nor the candies and popcorn, that makes Christmas; It is the Lord Jesus Christ, the greatest Giver of all. No matter where you may be, nor what you may have or don't have, if you have the Saviour in your heart you will always have Christmas. Not just one day out of the year but three-hundred and sixty-five days."

And that was what I was experiencing, I thought happily, throwing my arms around Papa's and Mama's neck and showering them with kisses of love and gratitude.