



A PIONEER CHRISTMAS

BY HAMLIN GARLAND

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THE first Christmas that I seem to remember fully has a wonderful quality to me. Like a picture by Rembrandt it has but one side defined, the other melts away into shadow—luminous shadow, where faint

light pulses across and lures the wistful gaze on and on into the unfathomable, where beginnings lie hidden.

The first I recall of my first Christmas I am riding behind my parents in a huge sleigh, amid high snow-drifts, sculptured into strange forms. It is growing dusk. Before us in a similar sleigh my young uncle, a giant in size, is leading the way. I can see him outlined against the dull, orange sky. He stands erect, holding the reins of his swiftly-moving horses in one of his powerful hands; occasionally he shouts back to my father, who is buried in a thick buffalo-skin coat. My mother is only another figure wrapped in shawls.

My sister and brother are beside me under the blankets on the straw. My brother is asleep, but I am on my knees looking ahead. I see now my uncle silhouetted on the dull, orange notch between two deep purple banks of trees. That is the place where the road pierces the woods. Suddenly, with rush of wind and jingle of bells, we enter the darkness of the forest, and the road begins to climb.

I cannot remember much after that; I suppose I grew sleepy. I have a dim memory of climbing hills, of the squall of sleigh-runners over bridges, and of the gurgle of ice-bound water, but it is all fused with dreams.

I was roused at last by the vigorous touch of my uncle and his hearty voice: "Wake up an' pay y'r lodgin'." I looked up and saw father standing beside the sleigh. I saw the dark branches of trees overhead, and heard the sound of many voices from the warmly-lighted little cabin's open door.

I bundled out, heavy with cold and sleep. As I stood there my uncle reached up his arms to take my mother down, not knowing of the rheumatism in her wrists. She gave a sharp scream, and my uncle's team started away on a swift run round the curve of the road toward the gate.

I stood like one in a dream, seeing the flying team and the wonderful race of my uncle toward the gate to intercept the runaways. He ran silently, with magnificent action, his head thrown up. As the team dashed through the gate his left hand caught the end board, and then I saw nothing further of the runaway.

We went into the house. It was a little house with two main rooms, the kitchen and the sitting-room. In the sitting-room was an open fireplace, the first I had ever seen—a wonder and a delight.

The women folks talked and laughed, creating an atmosphere of good cheer. The children were put to warm before the fire, where grandfather sat, a reticent and smiling old man of great size.

I suppose the room was poor enough, but I did not see that in the glow of that open fireplace. I heard my young and pretty Aunt Rebecca out in the kitchen opening oyster-cans—a great treat were oysters to us—and Aunt Deborah brought us in a handful of wonderful little crackers.

Mother sat out in the kitchen near the table and visited with my aunts while they worked. Soon father came "stomping" in with his hearty voice dominating the laughter of the women.

"Got anything good to eat?"  
 "Not unless you brought it," replied my saucy Aunt Deborah.

"Well, I guess I'll go home again. What's the use o' goin' visitin' unless you git somethin' better'n common?"

The women asked about the runaway, but father knew as little as they about it. At last my Uncle David came in.

"Did you stop 'em?" everybody asked. "You bet," he replied in his laconic way. "How's them oysters? I'm holler as a beech log."

The fragrance of the oyster soup wakened me more than the loud, hearty talk,

"I don't take no such stump as that," he shouted. The rest laughed, and Uncle Frank drew a broom-stick along the floor making hideous howls. Uncle David played on absorbedly, while we children shrieked with delight to see father bow and scrape and dance all sorts of double-shuffles and single-shuffles and nigger break-downs. Mother joined in too, and it seemed very wonderful to us. Grandfather smiled and patted his knees in time to the music.

"Oh, I'm too old!" shouted father as he dropped back into a chair, and the gale of fun ended as quickly as it had begun. Laughing and breathing hard, they all took seats and fell into silence, facing the fire, and Uncle David, his soul mellowed and subdued, played wild, strange tunes he had picked up somewhere without instruction—almost without repetition—strangely sweet and weird to me, worth infinitely more than Christmas presents. Love songs some of them were, full of sombre, longing inflections, which I could dimly feel, but could not understand.

He played "Maggie, Air You Sleepin'" and the wind outside went to my soul. Voices cried to me out of the cold and illimitable hill-land forests—voices that pleaded and wept:

"Oh, let me in, for loud the linn  
 Goes roarin' o'er the moorland craggy."

My uncle's handsome face grew sad, somehow, in the midst of happiness. He forgot his young wife and his sisters; his eyes looked away into storms, the future seemed to menace him.

He stopped abruptly, and put the violin in its box as if to hide his emotion.

I could hear the women laughing and moving about, and I lost my shiver of fear very soon. I heard the rattle of paper bags and parcels. I knew it was my duty to go to sleep, but I couldn't compose myself to it. People slept close together in those days. Making a bed on the floor was too common to call for comment. The men gave up the beds to the women and went noisily up-stairs to camp down on the floor of the low chamber. There was no fear of ventilation up-stairs or down. The wind drove the cold under the door, and along the floor the frost crept.

I lay facing the fireplace, after all had become still, hearing the trees southing outside, hearing the sad wail of a cat at the barn and watching the fire die away—but when the deep sleep of childhood came upon me I forgot Santa Claus and the stocking. I woke in the early light to hear Uncle David building the fire, and then came my brother's outcries and the hurly-burly of good cheer and hearty greeting from old and young. Mother's big stocking was overflowing with potatoes and wads of paper, with some little present far down at the toe. Everybody had something, if it were nothing more than an old door-knob or a doughnut.

The children had tin horses and tin soldiers, and monkeys on sticks (poor pathetic little toys these), and best of all, candy—wonderful candies of all conceivable sorts! The war had made candies an almost unattainable luxury—but Christmas would be empty and a hollow mockery without candy and nuts ("boughten nuts," not hazel-nuts and hickory-nuts, of which we had plenty, but the other strange kinds).

The hurly-burly lasted till breakfast was called, and everybody who could find place sat around and attacked the venison and potatoes which formed the meal.

The forenoon passed quickly with sleigh-rides with Uncle David, with games with the tin horses, and the dinner came for which the youngsters had little appetite. Turkey bowed humbly before candy. I do not seem to remember leave-taking, or the ride homeward. I remember only the desolate cold of the kitchen at home, into which we tramped and sat in our wraps until the fire began to roar in its iron cage.

Oh, winds of the winter night!  
 Oh, fire-light and the shine of tender eyes!  
 How far away you seem to-night, so faint and far,  
 each dear face shineth as a star.

Oh, uncle by the Western sea beyond the reach of Christmas snow, does not your heart hunger like mine to-night, for that Christmas eve among the trees—for the shine of undimmed eyes, for the hair untouched by gray, for the quaint, great figure seated in sombre reverie beside the fire?

It all lies in the unchanging land of the past. Its charm, its strange dominion cannot be felt again, except in reminiscent dream. No money, no railway train can take us back to it. Its power was the mystical union of youth, fire-light, great forests, music and the voice of moaning winds. A union which can never come again to you or me, father, mother, brother, any more than the prairies can return again, unscarred by spade and plough.



"We shrieked with delight to see father bow and scrape and dance"

and when we drew round the table in the little lean-to kitchen every face shone with the light of Christmas. The big pan of oyster soup (which we had only two or three times a year) and the paper bag of crackers formed the entire meal. It was an oyster supper in full of the term.

Slowly, one by one, the company drew back, and a subdued jollity succeeded as all went back to the sitting-room. There among the women, a few patterns were shown and exchanged, while the men told stories of logging and hunting, and bears and wolves and Indians.

The children listened with scared and fascinated souls, till at last father (who couldn't whistle a tune, but who never got enough of music) called out in his peremptory way:

"Come, get that fiddle out, Dave. Deb, open up that melodeon."

Ah! that was the best part of it all—the music. It made Christmas worth while. It was sweeter than oyster soup.

Uncle David played—old dance tunes that have passed from fiddler to fiddler until they have become veritable folk-songs. Then they all sang while he twanged the fiddle like a guitar, as an accompaniment. Aunt Deborah and mother sang "Nellie Wildwood," and "Belle Mahone," and "The Drummer Boy," and then father demanded all the old war songs—"Just before the Battle, Mother," and "The Battle Cry of Freedom," and "The Day of Jubilee."

Tired of singing at last, Uncle David struck into "Honest John" or some other old-fashioned square dance. One of my aunts came skipping across the room to where father sat. There was saucy daring in her attitudes.

"Come on, old man!" she said. The war had made my father bent and stiff before his time, but he sprang up.

My father broke the silence with an abrupt sigh.

"Well, well! Look here, 's time you youngsters climbed the stairs. Becky, where do these fellers go?"

Aunt Rebecca looked at us reflectively. "Well, now, I don't know. I guess we'll need to make a bed here on the floor."

"Goody!" cried my brother, "then we'll see Santa Claus."

The older people looked at each other and smiled. With the indifferent air of one who has a perfect understanding of it all, I scorned to be so silly.

"Mighty little you'll see of Santa Claus this night," said my aunt. "He can't get down here such a night as this."

For once in my life I was to be able to hang my stocking before a fireplace, and it revived my waning enthusiasm. Mother, with her abounding drollery, hung up the big stocking which went over her shoes. Everybody laughed at everybody's joke, and soon everything was arranged for the night.

I felt the illimitable presence of the Wisconsin forests to the north. To my child-mind this cabin was like a ship set in gray seas would seem to me now. All I knew of the world was in the tales my father told. The road we had come ran back a slender and desolate track, back to our home *coulde*—I could not tell the direction of it. Then my mind came back in a strange way to a visit I had made somewhere to a dark, swift stream which ran under a little bridge. There was a mysterious bag moored there by a rope, and it suggested bags of gold and robbers some-way. It swung to an fro with a wild motion. It grew dusk as I looked, and the wind grew cold and I ran away as fast as possible and—then my eyes came open and I realized I had been dreaming in the first stages of sleep.



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