

# WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

## Christmas Day in the Morning

PEARL S. BUCK

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*This simple tale by novelist Pearl S. Buck (1892–1973) was first published in Collier’s magazine in 1955. The daughter of Christian missionaries, Buck spent most of her life before 1934 in China. Upon her return to the United States in 1935, she became an advocate for women’s rights and racial equality. She was the first American woman to win the Nobel Prize for Literature for her 1931 novel The Good Earth.*

*This story invites reflection on how we should give and how giving can be taught. How do Rob and his wife celebrate Christmas now that their children are gone? What sparks the memory of his boyhood Christmas? What inspires his present for his father, and why is it a better gift than the tie he had originally purchased? What understanding does he come to about Christmas and the true purpose of gift-giving? Why does he add a love letter to his gift of a diamond brooch to his wife? What is “the magic of Christmas,” and how has it been restored by the end of the story?*

He woke suddenly and completely. It was four o’clock, the hour at which his father had always called him to get up and help with the milking. Strange how the habits of his youth clung to him still! Fifty years ago, and his father had been dead for thirty years, and yet he woke at four o’clock in the morning. He had trained himself to turn over and go to sleep, but this morning, because it was Christmas, he did not try to sleep.

Yet what was the magic of Christmas now? His childhood and youth were long past, and his own children had grown up and gone. Some of them lived only a few miles away but they had their own families, and though they would come in as usual toward the end of the day, they had explained with infinite gentleness that they wanted their children to build Christmas memories about their houses, not his. He was left alone with his wife.

Yesterday she had said, “It isn’t worthwhile, perhaps—”

And he had said, “Oh, yes, Alice, even if there are only the two of us, let’s have a Christmas of our own.”

Then she had said, “Let’s not trim the tree until tomorrow, Robert—just so it’s ready when the children come. I’m tired.”

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He had agreed, and the tree was still out in the back entry.

Why did he feel so awake tonight? It was, after all, a still night, a clear and starry night. There was no moon, of course, but the stars were extraordinary! Now that he thought of it, the stars always seemed large and clear before the dawn of Christmas Day.

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There was one star now that was certainly larger and brighter than any of the others. He could even imagine it moving, as it had seemed to move one night long ago.

He slipped back in time, as he did so easily nowadays. He was fifteen years old and still on his father's farm. He loved his father. He had not known it until one day a few days before Christmas, when he had overheard what his father was saying to his mother.

"Mary, I hate to call Rob in the morning. He's growing so fast and he needs his sleep. If you could see how he sleeps when I go in to wake him up! I wish I could manage alone."

"Well, you can't, Adam." His mother's voice was brisk. "Besides, he isn't a child anymore. It's time he took his turn."

"Yes," his father said slowly. "But I really don't want to wake him."

When he heard these words, something in him woke—his father loved him! He had never thought of it before, taking for granted the tie of their blood. Neither his father nor his mother talked about loving their children—they had no time for such things. There was always so much to do on a farm.

Now that he knew his father loved him, there would be no more wasting time in the mornings and having to be called again. He got up after that, stumbling blind with sleep, and pulled on his clothes, his eyes tight shut, but he got up.

And then on the night before Christmas, that year when he was fifteen, he lay for a few minutes thinking about the next day. They were poor, and most of the excitement was in the turkey they had raised themselves and in the mince pies his mother made. His sisters sewed presents and his mother and father always bought something he needed, not

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only a warm jacket, maybe, but something more, such as a book. And he saved and bought them each something, too.

He wished, that Christmas he was fifteen, he had a better present for his father. As usual he had gone to the ten-cent store and bought a tie. It had seemed nice enough until he lay thinking the night before Christmas, and then he wished that he had heard his father and mother talking in time for him to save for something better.

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He lay on his side, his head supported by his elbows, and looked out of his attic window. The stars were bright, much brighter than he ever remembered seeing them, and one star in particular was so bright that he wondered if it were really the Star of Bethlehem.

“Dad,” he had once asked when he was a little boy, “what is a stable?”

“It’s just a barn,” his father had replied, “like ours.”

Then Jesus Christ had been born in a barn and to a barn the shepherds and the Wise men had come, bringing their Christmas gifts!

The thought struck him like a silver dagger. He could also give his father a special gift, out there in the barn! He could get up early, earlier than four o’clock, and he could go into the barn and do all the milking. He’d do it alone, milk and clean up, and then when his father went in to start the milking, he’d see it all done. And he would know who had done it.

He must have woken twenty times, scratching a match each time to look at his old watch—midnight, and half past one, and then two o’clock.

At a quarter to three he got up and put on his clothes. He crept downstairs, careful of the creaky boards, and let himself out. The big star hung lower over the barn roof, a reddish gold. The cows looked at him, sleepy and surprised. It was early for them, too.

“So, Boss,” he whispered. They accepted him placidly and he fetched some hay for each cow and then got the milking pail and the big milk cans.

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He had never milked all alone before, but it seemed almost easy. He kept thinking about his father's surprise. His father would come in and call him, saying that he would start while Rob was getting dressed. He'd go to the barn, open the door, and then he'd go to get the two big empty milk cans. But they wouldn't be waiting or empty; they'd be standing in the milkhouse, filled with milk.

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"What in the world?" he could hear his father exclaiming.

He smiled and milked steadily, two strong streams rushing into the bucket, bubbly and warm. The cows were still surprised but acquiescent. For once they were behaving well, as though they knew it was Christmas.

The task went more easily than he had ever known it to before. Milking for once was not a chore. It was something else, a gift to his father that loved him. He finished, the two milk cans were full, and he covered them and closed the milkhouse door carefully, making sure the latch was closed. He put the stool in its place by the door and hung up the clean milk pail. Then he went out of the barn and locked the door behind him.

Back in his room he had only a minute to pull off his clothes in the darkness and jump into bed, for he heard his father.

"Rob!" his father called. "We have to get up, Son, even if it is Christmas."

"OK," he said sleepily.

"I'll go ahead," his father said. "I'll get things started."

The door closed and he lay still, laughing to himself. In just a few minutes his father would know. His dancing heart was ready to jump from his body.

The minutes were endless—ten, fifteen, he did not know how many—and then he heard his father's footsteps again. The door opened and he lay still.

"Rob!"

"Yes, Dad—"

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“You son of a gun. . .” His father was laughing, a queer, sobbing sort of laugh.

“Thought you’d fool me, did you?” His father was standing beside his bed, feeling for him, pulling away the blanket.

“It’s for Christmas, Dad!”

He found his father and clutched him in a great hug. He felt his father’s arms go around him. It was dark and they could not see each other’s faces.

“Son, I thank you. Nobody ever did a nicer thing—”

“Oh, Dad, I want you to know—I do want to be good!” The words broke from him of their own will. He did not know what to say. His heart was bursting with love.

“Well, I reckon I can go back to bed and sleep,” his father said after a moment. “No, no—the little ones are waking up. Come to think of it, Son, I’ve never seen you children when you first saw the Christmas tree. I was always in the barn. Come on!”

Rob got up and pulled on his clothes again and they went down to the Christmas tree, and soon the sun was creeping up to where the star had been. Oh, what a Christmas, and how his heart had nearly burst again with shyness and pride as his father told his mother and made the younger children listen about how he, Rob, had gotten up all by himself.

“The best Christmas gift I ever had, and I’ll remember it, Son, every year on Christmas morning, so long as I live.”

They had both remembered it, and now that his father was dead he remembered it alone: that special Christmas dawn when, alone with the cows in the barn, he had made his first gift of true love.

Outside the window now the great star slowly sank. He got up out of the bed, put on his slippers and bathrobe, and went softly upstairs to the attic to find the box of Christmas tree decorations. He took them downstairs into the living room. Then he brought in the tree. It was a little one—they had not had a big tree since the children went away—but he set it in the holder and then on the long table under the window. Then carefully he began to trim it.

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It was dawn very soon, the time passing as quickly as it had that morning long ago in the barn. He went to his library and fetched the little box that contained his special gift to this wife, a star of diamonds, not large but dainty in design. He had written the card for it the day before. He tied the gift on the tree and then stood back. It was pretty, very pretty, and she would be surprised.

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However, he was not satisfied. He wanted to tell her—to tell her how much he loved her. It had been a long time since he had really told her, although he loved her in a very special way, much more than when they were young.

He had been fortunate that she had loved him—and how fortunate that he had been able to love. Ah, that was the true joy of life, the ability to love! He was quite sure that some people were genuinely unable to love anyone, but love was alive in him, it still was.

It occurred to him suddenly that it was alive because long ago it had been born in him when he knew his father loved him. That was it: love alone could awaken love.

And he could give the gift again and again. This morning, this wonderful Christmas morning, he would give it to his beloved wife. He could write it down in a letter for her to read and keep forever. He went to his desk and began his love letter to his wife: “My dearest love. . .”

When it was finished he sealed it and tied it on the tree where she would see it the first thing when she came into the room. She would read it, surprised and then moved, and realize how very much he loved her.

He put out the light and went tiptoeing up the stairs. The star in the sky was gone, and the first rays of the sun were gleaming in the sky. Such a happy, happy Christmas.