

A Christmas of Long Ago

Lucy Maud Montgomery
1906

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L. M. Montgomery

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“Hurrah!” cried Ted, jubilantly. “Christmas will be here in a week. I wish it came every month.”

“Christmas will be extra nice this year because grandma is with us,” said Alice, with a loving glance at the old lady with the silver hair and bright brown eyes, who was knitting by the fire.

Grandma smiled.

“This will be only the second Christmas of my life that I have spent away from my own home,” she said. “The first one was sixty years ago, children, when I was a little girl of ten and went with my three brothers to spend Christmas with our grandfather and grandmother. We had a delightful drive. But it was a very different Christmas from your Christmas of to-day. We did not have your dozens of beautiful and expensive presents nor your wonderful trees and decorations. Still, we thought our Christmas at grandfather’s just about right.”

“Tell us about it,” pleaded the children, who loved to hear grandma talk of those far-away years when she was a little girl.

“When I came here last week I came on the train,” said grandma, “but in those days there were no railroads near where we lived, and we drove the thirty miles to grandfather’s the day before Christmas. It was cold and frosty, and there was plenty of snow. Mother wrapped us all warmly up in shawls and homespun caps and mufflers, and we did not mind the cold. We went on what was called a ‘wood sleigh’—just boards on runners. Father had put some straw on it and mother had spread a big rug over it. We all sat close together on this, and when the slews or the pitches were very bad we clung to the upright stakes in the corners or the jingling iron chains that connected them.

“When we got to grandfather’s at twilight and trooped into the kitchen, such a fire as they had for us! You never see such fires nowadays. There was a big open fireplace taking up most of one end of the room, with just snug corners on each side of it. Grandfather had heaped it with great hickory logs, and they were blazing with delightful fierceness, sending a rosy glow out on our faces and lighting up the whole of the old-fashioned room with its low ceiling and long black rafters, from which hung festoons of dried apples and grandmother’s assortment of herbs. Grandfather had tacked green boughs all around the room in honor of the season. At home we thought ourselves very modern because we had stoves; but we loved that splendid fireplace of grandfather’s.

Such a pleasant evening as we had, all sitting about it—uncles, aunts, and cousins—not needing even candlelight. The older folks told stories, and we children listened open-eyed, while we munched apples and cracked beech nuts. Our dreams that night were haunted by Indians and bears galore.

We did not have Christmas trees then—we had not even heard of them. Before we went to bed, grandmother took our stockings and hung them along the chimney-piece in a dangling row. We had never hung up our stockings at home, for how could Santa Claus come down a stove-pipe and through a stove? But we were sure he could come down that splendid big chimney easy enough.

In the morning our stockings were full when we all came trooping into the kitchen. I don't know what you would have thought of our presents, but we were delighted with them. There was not a bought present among them—all were homemade. I got a pair of red mittens knitted in a fancy pattern, such as Aunt Emmy could knit; a scarf of shaded wool in blues, knitted in grandmother's famous "checker-board pattern;" a big rag doll dressed in a piece of Aunt Ada's wedding dress, a white muslin apron with six bows on the shoulders, and a bag of homemade candy. I remember there was a sled for each of the boys, and one of the elderwood whistles for the making of which grandfather was celebrated. I believed in Santa Claus wholeheartedly, and I begged grandfather to tell me if he had shown Santa how to make the whistles. I thought Mrs. Santa Claus must have known the fancy stripe and checker-board pattern.

The other children went to church with the grown-ups, for there was always service on Christmas morning then. I stayed home to help grandmother with the dinner, for I was the oldest girl. I have never forgotten that big pantry with the stores of good things she had prepared and the plum pudding, cooked a fortnight beforehand, and bigger than I had ever thought a plum pudding could be. We set the table in the kitchen and, as a special privilege, I was allowed to place thereon the dishes of the set that had been part of grandmother's wedding plenishings. They were a handsome dark blue, and not a piece had been broken in forty years.

We did not have any elaborate decorations—none at all, indeed, except the two big dishes full of red apples, polished until they shone. But there was really no room for decorations; the good things to eat occupied all the available space. What delectable odors filled that big kitchen when the hungry guests came home from church. My brother Tom declared he smelt the roast goose four miles down the road!

Everybody had good appetites and did full justice to grandmother's Christmas cheer. We all sat around the table until late in the afternoon, talking, laughing, and telling stories. Finally, we girls helped grandmother wash the dishes, and then it was time to go home through the crisp, waning December afternoon, and Christmas at grandfather's was over, to be talked of and remembered vividly all through the winter. That was the nicest Christmas I ever spent, dearie."

“It sounds jolly,” said Ted. “I wish we could have Christmases like that now.”

Grandma smiled.

“You have just as good Christmases, although in a different way. You would have thought that celebration very simple and quiet I am afraid. But remember, dearie, it’s the spirit of Christmas that counts. It must be a spirit of goodwill and kindness and joy and love. We must never forget the real meaning of Christmas—never let it be dimmed by any false meanings, and then our Christmases will always be happy and blessed and long to be remembered, no matter where or how they are celebrated.”

“That is true,” said Alice, soberly. “We’ll all try to make our Christmas the right kind, grandma.”

“But I do wish we had a big fireplace,” said Ted.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *A Christmas of Long Ago* by L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery]