

### CHRISTMAS TIME

Christmas that year began as a rather somber affair. Lido, who had been so much help, who had played such an important part in their lives, was sorely missed, especially by Mother and Lizzie Lou. Her name was never mentioned. Grandpa was doing the rounds of his sons' homes, so the house was very quiet. At school, the children sang Christmas songs and prepared for the afternoon Christmas concert which neither parent attended. Even when holidays began, the Christmas spirit eluded them.

Then it came with a rush. Father and Benny found a beautiful tree, and Mother unpacked the family decorations. Lizzie Lou got Benny and Janey to make paper chains from bright magazine pictures cut in strips, pasted with flour and water glue to drape from the log beams. Although they got scolded for using up most of Mother's writing paper to make snow flakes for the windows, nothing could detract from their delicate loveliness.

Lizzie Lou helped Mother with the Christmas cooking, iced cookies, cooked doughnuts, washed bowls and pans, helped to store the fruit cakes and mince tarts in cookie tins high on the pantry shelves.

Lizzie Lou had no illusions about Santa Claus. While sweeping the floor, she had discovered several boxes under her parent's bed. She told no one, seeing no reason why she could not be a knowledgeable supporter of the Santa Claus myth. If it wasn't true, it ought to be.

Christmas morning broke clear and cold. Having the day off, Father got up first and lit the kitchen stove, put on the big kettle, whistling happily. The children knew better than to get up until they were called. Finally Benny could stand the suspense no longer.

"Did Santa Claus come, Daddy?"

A cheerful "Yes" from the kitchen was enough. The three children scrambled out of their warm beds grabbed sweaters and slippers, and stood in a row viewing the tree. The Wallingfords

had never bothered with Christmas stockings or gift wrappings. The presents were spread out beneath the tree as though Santa had just dumped his bag and left in a hurry.

There were new coats with fur collars from Eatons, new games quickly scanned and set aside for future fun, books, dolls for Janey, water colours for Lizzie Lou, packages of BB ammunition for Benny's air rifle. There were mittens and scarves knitted by an old New Brunswick auntie, a stamp book and envelopes of stamps, a pocket knife, doll's dishes, a big bouncy coloured ball, and new fuzzy slippers for everyone.

"We never had a Christmas tree in New Brunswick," said Mother. "We all hung up our stockings in a row, and each got an orange, Christmas candy, and one gift each, a brooch or a necklace for the girls. Then we all had to dress for church."

Father had no memory of a tree, but remembered getting a stocking and mostly the food—a goose and a Christmas pudding with coins buried in it. Once he had found a sovereign. He chuckled at the memory of his sisters' jealousy. Then they would all go to the pantomime.

The Wallingford children could not imagine their parents' childhood at all. Had they ever really been kids? Why didn't this family go to church or the pantomime, whatever that is, Lizzie Lou asked herself. Then she realized that neither church or pantomime existed in their community and gave up her speculation to enjoy the day.

They had dressed and were about to have breakfast when there was a tap on the door. It was Blondie and Bertie, each with a little toy in hand. Invited in, they were overwhelmed by the display of Santa's generosity to the Wallingford children. All they had to show were things found in their stockings, a jumping jack in Bertie's and a little leather purse on a chain in Blondie's.

This was so unexpected, so strange, that Lizzie Lou stood them up and questioned them closely as to possible causes for Santa's neglect. They lived in a new, big house, their parents ran

a business, they employed a nice housekeeper. They seemed rich to Lizzie Lou. Santa could never have left them out.

“You both have been good?”

“Yes, real good. Yes.”

Do your parents believe in Santa Claus?”

Yes. They told us to be good so that Santa would come.”

Well, it turned out they had a tree. It was down in the play room and the door was locked. It was going to stay locked until the grandparents and old aunties came that afternoon.

“It isn’t fair,” sniffed Bertie “We went around to peek in the Nestors and they had all their stuff, and so did the Duncans. You have all your stuff. It isn’t fair.”

Lizzie Lou pondered a few seconds. Her disbelief in Santa had been sorely shaken by the bounty that had come their way. Her father would never have locked up their gifts, even if he had a room to lock, which he did not. Her mind went back to the Strawberry Cheque, and Grandpa’s words to her father

“Jack, you should have cut out the Middle Man. A middle man comes between buyer and seller and creams the profit from both. Grafters!”

The parents of Blondie and Bertie were coming between giver and receivers. Their father was head of the house. He should be told. Lizzie Lou got out her new writing paper and went to the desk.

“Writing thank you notes so soon?” asked Mother. Lizzie Lou nodded and wrote as fast as she could. This was a very private affair. The words may have been better chosen but she had to hurry to escape more attention.

*Dear Sir:*

*Christmas is a time for children. Santa Claus comes to children. His presents are for them. It is wrong to stand between your children and the gifts that are for them. You*



*have the unhappiest children in Burnaby. Please stop being the Middle Man in this transaction. Don't you want your children to be happy and love you? You are making it very hard for them. My Grandpa says Middle Men are Grafters. Merry Christmas.*

*A Friend.*

*Miss Elizabeth Louise Wallingford*

She carefully folded up the note and sealed it in a little pink envelope. Bertie took it with deep sigh and the Bentham children went off home up the trail, no longer tearful. They had faith in Lizzie Lou as a fixer.

The Wallingfords had just finished breakfast when there was a knock at the door and in came Bertie and Blondie, beaming, giggling, and anxious to show off their gifts. Blondie was hugging a beautiful new doll and Bertie was decked out in a cowboy suit, complete with cap gun.

"He opened the door and let us in to look at the tree," they babbled together. "There are lots of boxes and parcels. We could look but not touch. Then he let us each pick out one thing."

While the Wallingford children gathered around to examine these nice gifts, Bertie handed Lizzie Lou a note. She gulped once or twice, placed it in a book she was reading and retired to a corner. She opened it feeling very nervous.

*Dear Miss Wallingford,  
Thank you indeed for reminding me of my  
fatherly responsibilities. I must apologize for  
my children whining at your door, but your  
words made sense. I took appropriate action.  
I am sure you will appreciate our family  
postponing - with the children's consent - the  
rest of our festivities to delight the hearts of our  
elderly family members this afternoon. I hope  
this puts me out of the grafter classification.  
Merry Christmas to you and yours,*

*Yr. obedient servant.*

*P.R.Bentham*

Lizzie Lou was embarrassed. She read the letter again. His handwriting was not MacLean's Muscular Movement but it was very readable. She walked to the stove, lifted the lid, and tossed it in. She had been carried away and wanted to forget the whole thing.

Another unexpected occurrence that day was Grandpa's return. He had been driven over by Uncle Jake. While Grandpa took his belongings into his cold and empty bedroom and lit his oil heater, Uncle Jake confided to Mother that Grandpa had been sparking a widow two houses down the street and had even had the nerve to ask her for Christmas dinner. The uncles feared they might find themselves with two elders to support, and decided to take him to Burnaby "while the taking was good." Lizzie Lou had maneuvered around to hear this. What was "sparking a widow"? She would not dare ask because Mother would know she had been eavesdropping.

Uncle Jake stayed a few minutes, admiring the Christmas things, gave each child a fifty cent piece, kissed them all, gave Mother a brotherly hug, and he was off in his T model Ford.

Christmas dinner was a fine affair. Days earlier, Mr. Harris had sold Father two plump hens which had stopped laying. Father had immediately invited Mr. and Mrs. Harris to Christmas dinner. Somewhat indignant at the one-sided nature of this transaction, but resigned to do Jack's will, Mother had stuffed and cooked the chickens to a brown perfection. By soft lamplight, the family feast spread on a spotless linen tablecloth, with a centre-piece of berried holly, its highly polished sterling silverware and elegant dinner plates, belied the primitive surroundings in which it was located.

Everyone had a small glass of wine, and pulled Christmas crackers which had been tucked into one of the parcels from the East. Fortunes and paper hats completed the feast. It was most satisfactory, worth the effort.

Mr. and Mrs. Harris had brought gifts for the children-lace edged handkerchiefs for the

girls, and a cherry wood slingshot for Benny which was accompanied by a little talk about choosing targets with care, a slingshot being a powerful weapon, witness the battle of David and Goliath. Benny promised to select his targets with care. Mr. Harris beamed.

The women and Lizzie Lou then did the dishes, while Benny and Janey played a new Snakes and Ladders game. Father lit up his pipe, which Mr. Harris viewed with some disgust, even disdain.

"H'I used to smoke like a chimbley," he confessed. "Then when h'I was sitting on guard duty over a Dam in the Great War, a lovely morning, birds singing, h'I couldn't get my pipe to draw. H'I sat looking at h'it- an 'orrible filthy thing. I h'asked myself, what are you, a grown man, doing with an 'orrible thing like that in your mouth? I 'eaved h'it h'into the river. Never smoked since."

If he imagined that his story would influence Jack Wallingford into following his example, he was doomed to be disappointed. Jack surrounded by fragrant Virginia cut tobacco smoke, told one or two of his own adventures, Mr. Harris sitting back listening in polite, bored silence.

Just as the dishes were finished, Grandpa, who had retired to his room, emerged with his fiddle and bow tucked under his arm, inviting them all to sing carols. Chairs were circled around, and once again every-thing was lovely and the Christmas atmosphere revived. Everybody sang.

Janey sang a sweet little solo she had learned at school that went *"It's just before Christmas and nobody knows / The secrets we're keeping all under the rose, So it's hush, don't tell- Just a while longer and all will be well."*

Mrs. Harris, a shy little woman, then told of her childhood in England, being one of a big, fatherless family, so poor they could not always afford a fire. Their cottage floor was covered with straw to keep their feet warm. On Christmas Day the parish would bring them around a bounteous meal, with mittens for all the children. Their mother would hide a shilling in the straw,

and whoever found it could spend it. In her eyes, the Wallingford children were very, very fortunate. She had never found the shilling.

Mother then recited one of her favourite Drummond poems about the "Nice Leetle Canadien." *"She's pretty. she's smart and got plentee de heart if you know de right way go about..."*

Mr. Harris then returned them to the Christmas theme with a condensed version of Dickens' Christmas Carol.

Father, who had some time ago emptied his Christmas bottle, made a gallant effort to recite a poem about a River Captain named Jim Bledso who, in an attempt to win a race on the Mississippi River, tied down the safety valve of his ship's boiler. When he realized that the boiler was going to blow up, he urged the passengers and crew to get off quickly, knowing he was going to die. "I'll hold her nozzle agin the bank till the last galoots ashore."

Apparently the captain did blow up with his ship, and father, with tears in his eyes, struggled with the philosophical ending. "He waren't no saint..." but the author reckoned that God and the angels would welcome such a hero into heaven with open arms, despite his sinful life. Lizzie Lou had never seen her father so moved. Tears trickled down his cheeks.

His audience sat in a mix of puzzlement and amazement. Grandpa had not stayed. He had simply stood up, stared coldly at his son-in-law, carried his fiddle back to his room, put on his felt hat and overcoat, lit the lantern and stomped off to the outhouse. This signalled the end of the party. Mr. and Mrs. Harris bade everyone "Merry Christmas! Good night! Thank you!" several times and departed up the path. The children were scooted off to bed.

Lizzie Lou was sleepy, but stayed awake trying to sort out the good from the bad. Father's recitation had been pretty awful. It showed him in a new light. Somehow she sensed his need to be admired, to be a hero, to be the most important. She did not know where this



enlightenment came from but she could understand him a little better. It was nothing she could discuss even with Mother. Her correspondence with Mr. Bentham she would try to forget. And what was "sparking a widow"? She had almost forgotten that mystery. She said her prayer, blessing her Lido and wished she could remember what she looked like. No card, no note, from her.

Nobody knew how she missed her aunt. A tear slid down her cheek as tiredness overcame her and she joined Janey in sleep.

### THE FIRE BRIGADE

It was early March. Lizzie Lou awoke early and cuddled down in bed beside Janey, still fast asleep, to ponder Douglas Road School. It was her haven, her hope, the place where all the secrets of knowledge were being revealed. She loved the graded readers that indicated by the nature of their selections how well one was advancing in the world of poetry and prose.

She loved starting a new scribbler with its promise of perfection if she strove hard enough. She loved getting a new pen nib, licking it carefully to remove the oil to enable the ink to flow smoothly. She loved the blackboards, with clear instructions for every grade.

Lizzie Lou had no close friend unless you counted one boy named Stewart who used to wait for the Wallingford family at the bottom of his street. Lizzie Lou wore a Red Riding Hood style raincoat, and he used to say "Good morning, Moonface." To which she would reply, "Good morning, Stewpot", upon which he would take her books or whatever she was carrying and they would walk together in friendly companionship.

Lizzie Lou liked to get to school early enough to skip, not an easy thing to do with too long skirts and high laced boots. She could hold her own, jumping for all she was worth, feeling her pigtails whacking her back. The Parents Group had supplied the school with a lovely long, new skipping rope and whoever got to school first could take it out. Under her breath she sang her favorite skipping song.

*Mother, Mother, may I go out? The boys are round the corner  
They want to take me out. They want to give me apples,  
They want to give me pears, They want to give me fifty cents  
For kissing them on the stairs. O, I don't want their apples  
O, I don't want their pears. O, I don't want their fifty cents  
For kissing them on the stairs.  
I'd rather sweep the kitchen- I'd rather wash the floor-  
I'd rather kiss the butcher boy behind the kitchen door.*

Then all the girls would chant: "How many kisses did you get?" and the counting would

begin, with cries of "shame" as the number climbed until the skipper tripped. A short rhyme that gave more girls a turn went like this:

*House for Rent apply within. People moving out for drinking gin  
Drinking gin is a very bad sin. As they move out then I move in.*

The Douglas Road School kids knew a lot of games that did not require any equipment at all. There was London Bridge. Two of the older kids would clasp hands and anyone who wanted to play would line up and march through the arch formed by their clasped hands. All sang :

*London Bridge is falling down, falling down, falling down,  
London Bridge is falling down, my fair lady.  
Chip chop ! Chip chop! The last man's head's off!*

The raised arms would be lowered over the head of the person passing through who would be given a whispered choice between Pie or Cake or whatever the Bridge had chosen. The choice made, the prisoner would go stand behind the partner who had won him, and the song would start. When all the marchers had been allocated, a terrific tug of war would ensue as arms wrapped around the waist of the kid in front, the two sides struggled. It often ended with everyone rolling around on the grass, laughing

A very popular circle game was called "I wrote a letter to my love." The players would form a circle, holding hands, and move around while on the outside ran the Doggie holding a scarf.

Everyone sang:

*I wrote a letter to my love and on the way I dropped it  
A little doggie picked it up and put it in his pocket.  
And he won't bite you, and he won't bite you....  
Doggie: He WILL bite you....*

and he would drop the scarf and run around the outside of the circle. The one tagged had to snatch up the scarf and run around the circle in the opposite direction. Whoever reached the gap

first and the loser was the doggie as the song started up again.

Lizzie Lou liked the game "In and Out the Windows" best. A circle would form, someone would be chosen as the Lover. All sang:

*In and out the windows  
Go in and out the windows  
Go in and out the windows,  
For we must gain the day.*

As they sang, the lover would weave in and out of the raised arms. He would then kneel in front of one of the players. All would sing:

*I kneel because I love you,  
I kneel because I love you,  
I kneel because I love you,  
For we must gain the day.*

He would then take the hand of his love and the song would go on:

*I measure my arm to show you,  
I measure my arm to show you,  
I measure my arm to show you,  
For we must gain the day.*

The couple would then go in and out the windows, and the group would sing:

*I take my wife to London,  
I take my wife to London,  
I take my wife to London,  
For we must gain the day.*

The couple would then break up, and two would go in and out the windows, two couples would take their wives to London, and separate, until there were no singles left and the game would break up in laughter and teasing about who chose who.

She hoped they would have singing today. They had learned the scales- Do, Ra, Me, Fah, Sol, La, Tee, Do. Miss Burton had a tuning fork that she would rap on her desk to get the correct note, Then she would begin the hand signals which they must follow until they were "in

voice". Lizzie Lou's favorite song was the Fire Brigade. She sang it very softly to herself.

*The Fire Brigade are a famous host  
Ever ready, ever steady, pumping away.  
In danger and need they are at their post  
Ever ready ever steady, pumping away.  
House on fire! House on fire!  
Clear the street! hark the beat  
Of the horses' feet-  
O the Fire Brigade! Fire Brigade!  
Ever ready, ever steady, pumping away.*

*A child at a window is screaming wild-  
Ever ready, ever steady, pumping away.  
Then up with the ladder and save that child....*

She broke off her singing. This verse reminded Lizzie Lou of a real fire that happened right here in the Cedar Shake Shack. There had been no fire brigade involved or even considered.

Father had been on shift. Grandpa, Mother, and the three children had been sitting around the table when Lizzie Lou looked up and saw to her amazement a round black circle with little flames around it. The shakes were on fire! She stood up and pointed. No words were needed.

She had never seen Grandpa move so fast. He was into his room like a flash, returning with some long rubber tubing, grabbing the water bucket as he sped back. He put the tall stool up on the table and told Benny to climb up and stand on it right under the fire. As he did, Mother put the enamel mixing bowl upside down on his head to keep his hair from catching fire. Grandpa gave Benny one end of the tubing, put the other end in the bucket on the table beside Benny's stool, and began to squeeze a little bulb he held in his hand. Mother moved the kerosene lamp out of the way.

A steady little stream of water pumped through the tubing, and Benny pointed it at each little flame. As he worked around the circle, each little flame went out. The fire was out, the

bucket was empty, Benny was damp and dizzy, Grandpa was exhausted, Mother teary eyed. Little splashes of rain came down through the round black hole and may have helped save the day.

"Your enema equipment!" said Mother in a shocked voice, finally identifying the fire fighting equipment as she stood hugging Benny.

"Yes! My enema equipment!" snapped Grandpa, rolling up the tubing. With shaking hands he cut a piece of cut plug that he kept in his vest pocket.

"Jack had better get a spark guard for the chimney."

Mother began cleaning the water bucket with chloride of lime and boiling water, and placed the wash basin under the drips. Grandpa took his tubing and limped off to bed. Mother announced it was bedtime for the girls and Benny would get a bath before he went to bed. She was very proud of her boy.

Of course Father had put in a couple of new shakes and somewhat sheepishly brought home spark guards for both chimneys. Benny had been rewarded by some new gumboots. Mother would not explain enemas. The affair was not discussable. Lizzie Lou for once could only agree.

She wondered for a moment whether enema tubing had anything to do with sparking a widow, but she doubted it. The only thing they had in common, both involved Grandpa and Mother would not discuss either.

She wished she could find the right words to tell the class about this exciting fire in talk time, but she could not. She sighed a deep sigh. The Wallingford family was just too different. Time to get up and help little Janey to dress and perhaps meet Stewart on the way to school. He had a little brother too, who hated school and gave Stewart a lot of trouble. At least her little brother Benny was nice.