**A Christmas Miracle**



Rose rubbed the sleeve of her nightgown against the frosty glass and peered out into the night sky. The moon peeked over the mountain behind the little cabin.

Rose searched the sky. She needed to find a shooting star. Christmas was only three days away, and she had to make a wish.

"Rose McKenzie, stop your daydreaming," Mama said. She pulled the curtain shut and kissed the top of Rose's head. "It's time for bed."

Rose scrubbed her face and hands in the washbasin and ran a brush through her tangled hair. Her brothers, James and Henry, were settling down on their mattresses near the fire. Baby Bonnie was already fast asleep in her little bed -- a drawer lined with soft blankets that rested on the chair beside her parents' bed.

Rose leaned over to kiss the baby good-night. Then she kissed Mama and Papa, blew out the lantern, and crawled into the little fold-up bed next to the window that she shared with her sister, Sarah.

Rose tugged the covers to her chin. The fire in the fireplace hissed and popped. Papa's snores rattled through the cabin. Outside, the wind rustled through the trees.

And Rose thought she would never fall asleep. It was too close to Christmas, too close to the most wonderful day of the year, and too close to the morning when her family would open small homemade gifts again.

Rose looked out the window again. She remembered how Mama had stared at the lacy green dress in the window of Mr. Pranger's store when they drove into town. Rose wanted to give her mama that dress.

She closed her eyes and could see Mama opening it on Christmas morning.

There was Mama, laughing out loud in surprise. The green lace dress matched Mama's sparkling green eyes.

Then Papa opened his gift -- a shiny black pipe. Not a homemade one, whittled from a hickory branch. A brand-new pipe ordered from a catalog and shipped all the way from New York City.

Bonnie's gift was a crib, carved and painted, and the boys got new wool coats. In Sarah's gift was a note that said, "Look outside." Sarah pulled open the door, and there stood a dapple gray pony with a big red ribbon around his neck.

"They got just what they wanted," Rose murmured.

She opened her eyes. Sunlight streamed into the cabin.

Rose shook her head. "It was only a dream," Rose said, as she smiled. "But what a wonderful dream. I wish it could come true."

After breakfast, Rose helped her mother wash dishes. "Mama," she said. "If you could have anything for Christmas, anything at all, what would you wish for?"

Mama smiled and set the clean plates in the cupboard. "I already have everything I could want -- you, your brothers and sisters, and your father, all in good health."

"I know, but I mean something extra," Rose said, as she squeezed out the dish towel. "Something wrapped in a box that you could open on Christmas morning. What would it be?"

"Well, it would be a mighty funny-looking box," said Mama. "But if I could have something extra, I'd wish for a Christmas tree, tall and full, with so many decorations you could hardly see the branches. And a big, plump turkey I could roast with dressing and potatoes." She leaned against the cupboard and smiled. "And when it was done, we would sit down at the table next to our Christmas tree, and eat the finest Christmas dinner any of us have ever tasted." She closed her eyes. "I can almost taste it now."

"And a new dress?" asked Rose. "Would you like a new dress?"

"Yes," Mama nodded. "A new dress." Then she shook her head. "But there's no sense wishing for something you can't have."

Papa chuckled. "Looks like Rose isn't the only dreamer in the family." He reached for his rifle. "I can't promise you a turkey, but maybe I can find a fat goose for our Christmas dinner."

He pulled on his coat and headed toward the woods.

Rose waited for Papa all morning. While she swept the cabin, peeled potatoes, and mended her stockings, she kept peeking out the window to see if Papa would bring home a goose.

Finally, just before noon, Papa tramped out of the woods carrying a gunnysack over his shoulder. Rose threw down her mending and burst out the door.

"Papa, you did it!" she cried. "We'll have roast goose for Christmas after all."

Papa laughed. "Not quite, missy." He opened the sack. "I didn't see any geese, but I did bring home a pheasant big enough to feed seven hungry McKenzies."

Papa hung the pheasant under the eaves outside the cabin. Its russet and green feathers gleamed in the sunlight.

"I'll need to clean it," Papa said. He blew on his hands and rubbed them together. "First I need to go inside and warm up. Is that your mama's potato soup I smell?"

Rose followed Papa inside and helped Mama ladle out seven bowls of soup.

While they ate, Rose tried to watch the pheasant. But every time she glanced out the window, Papa said, "Eat your soup."

After lunch, Rose ran to the window and shouted, "Oh, no! Papa, look. He's eating our Christmas dinner!"

Here's the conclusion of "A Christmas Miracle":

Rose pointed at a bear that had wandered into the yard and pulled the pheasant down from the eaves.

Papa flung open the door. The bear ran off into the woods. All that remained were a few russet feathers lying in the grass.

The next day was Christmas Eve. After breakfast, Papa, Henry, and James pulled on their boots and coats and set out for the woods.

"Don't worry," Papa said. "We'll have a fine Christmas dinner yet."

Rose waited by the window. Sarah came and sat down beside her. The sun rose high in the sky. Finally Papa and the boys hiked out of the woods. James carried a gunnysack over his shoulder. Rose and Sarah rushed to the door, and Rose flung it open.

"Did you get another pheasant?" Rose asked.

"Is it as big as the first one?" asked Sarah.

"Not a pheasant," said Papa, "and not as big."

James opened the sack and pulled out a small quail. "Birds just aren't that plentiful this time of year," said Papa. "But we won't leave this one under the eaves." He laughed and said, "That pesky bear can catch his own Christmas dinner." Papa and the boys cleaned the quail right away and brought it into the house.

Rose stared at the little bird. "But this can't be our dinner," she said. "It's barely enough to feed Bonnie."

"Nonsense," said Mama. Then she kissed Papa on the cheek. "It's exactly enough. Rose, you can help me peel potatoes, carrots, and onions for quail soup. And Sarah, you can help me bake loaves of bread. Then you can both take turns churning fresh butter. This will be the finest meal we've eaten in months."

Mama pulled her big soup kettle from the cupboard and put it on the stove.

The quail soup simmered, and the bread dough baked into crusty brown loaves. Savory aromas filled the cabin. Rose and Sarah churned butter until they were sure their arms would fall off.

Finally, as the sun sank over the mountaintop, Mama said, "Help me set the table, Henry. Dinner's ready."

Sarah and James scrambled to their chairs. Rose placed the bread in the center of the table, and Henry set out bowls and spoons. Mama carried the hot soup over from the stove, and Papa held Bonnie in his arms. Then they all bowed their heads to give thanks.

Tap. Tap. Rose looked up. Someone was knocking at the cabin door.

Mama frowned at Papa and said, "Who would be visiting way out here at this time of night?"

Tap. Tap. Papa opened the door. A stranger stood on the step. His eyelids sagged with weariness.

The stranger's voice quivered. "Could you shelter a hungry traveler from the cold?"

"Of course," Papa said. He opened the door for the stranger. "You're just in time for dinner. We don't have much, but you are welcome to share what we have."

"Bless you," said the stranger. "Merry Christmas."

Mama set an extra place at the table and began ladling out the soup. When she finished filling the eighth bowl -- the stranger's bowl -- the soup kettle was empty. "Look at that," Mama said. She set the bowl in front of the stranger. "We have just enough."

After dinner, the stranger helped clear the table, then sat in a chair by the fire.

"Where did you come from?" Sarah asked him.

The man chuckled. "I've traveled for so long, it's hard to say just where I'm from. I've been to the Great Lakes and to New York City and to the White House. I've even met Abraham Lincoln himself."

Henry's eyes grew wide. "Abraham Lincoln!" he exclaimed.

The stranger nodded. "Twice. I plan to keep traveling and meeting good folks like yourselves. I want to see the ocean someday, and the Grand Canyon."

"And the giant redwoods?" asked James.

"And the giant redwoods," said the stranger. He pulled a harmonica from his pocket and began playing. Papa pushed the table aside and pulled Rose to the center of the floor. Sarah picked up Bonnie, Mama grabbed the boys, and soon everyone was dancing.

The stranger played and played, and Rose's family danced and danced. Finally, Mama collapsed in a chair. "Time for bed," she said.

James and Henry piled blankets on the floor by the fire for the stranger, and everyone crawled into bed.

Before Rose closed her eyes, she took one more look out the window. A bright yellow star shot across the sky, leaving a sparkling trail behind it. "Oh!" she cried. Rose stared at the shooting star.

"Please let my family have a wonderful Christmas," she whispered, "and let Mama have a Christmas tree."

Dawn peeked over the mountain. Rose opened her eyes. It was Christmas! She would surprise her parents and the traveling stranger by making the coffee before anyone else awoke.

She tiptoed toward the fire. James and Henry were fast asleep, and the stranger was gone! On the floor where he had slept lay a bulging gunnysack.

"Mama! Papa!" Rose shouted. "Look."

Her parents rushed over, Sarah stumbled out of bed, and the boys sat up on their mattresses. They all stared at the sack.

"It's filled with presents," Papa said. He pulled out a box and read the tag. "This one's for you, Sarah, and this one's for Mama."

He passed out the gifts, then he, Mama, Sarah, and the boys began pulling off wrapping paper.

Mama lifted a green lace dress from her box, and Papa opened a shiny, new pipe. James and Henry unwrapped new wool coats, Sarah unwrapped a toy horse, and Mama helped baby Bonnie unwrap the biggest gift of all -- a crib, carved and painted, just like in Rose's dream.

Rose watched in silence. She was happy for her family. Still, the sack was empty, and there was no gift for her. She ran to the window to hide her tears.

"Oh!" she cried. "Look!"

Outside stood a fir tree, full and tall, with beautiful hand-carved decorations. Rose ran out the door. On the tree was a note that said: "To Rose. Merry Christmas."

"It's a miracle!" she shouted. "My wish came true. Merry Christmas!"

