

Christmas Day in the Morning

by Pearl S. Buck

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 waked at four o'clock in the morning. He had trained himself to turn over and go to sleep, but this morning it was Christmas, he did not try to sleep.

Why did he feel so awake today? He slipped back in time, as he did so easily nowadays. He was 15 years old and still on his father's farm. He loved his father. He had not known it until on a 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 mornings. He's growing so fast and 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 sure do hate 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 the farm.

Now that he knew his father loved him, there would be no more loitering 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 15, 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 the mince pies his mother made. His sisters sewed presents, and his mother and father always bought something he needed--not 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 15, 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. He looked out of his attic window; the stars were bright.

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

"It's just a bar," his father had replied, "like ours."

Then Jesus had been born in a barn, and to a barn the shepherds had come....

The thought struck him like a silver dagger. Why should he not have his father a special gift too, out there in the barn? He could get up early, earlier than four o'clock, and he could creep into the barn and get all the milking done. 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 laughed to himself as he gazed at the stars. It was what he would do, and he mustn't sleep too sound.

He must have waked 20 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 cows looked at him sleepy and surprised. It was early for them too.

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 get him, saying that he would get things started 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 milk house, filled.

"What the...," he could hear his father exclaiming.

He smiled and milked steadily, two strong streams rushing into the pail, frothing and fragrant.

The task went more easily than he had ever known it to go before. Milking for once was not a chore. It was something else--a gift to his father who loved him. He finished. The two milk cans were full; and he covered them and closed the milk house door carefully, making sure of the latch.

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 up. He put the covers over his head to silence his quick breathing. The door opened.

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

"Aw-right," he said sleepily.

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 he heard his father's footsteps again. The door opened. He lay still.

"Rob!"

"Yes, Dad..."

His father was laughing, a queer sobbing sort of a laugh.

"Thought you'd fool me, did you?" His father was standing beside his bed, feeling for him pulling away the cover.

"It's for Christmas, Dad!"

He found his father and clutched 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.

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