

Christmas Morning—1906

Aldyth Morris

BY NOW THE CHRISTMASSES OF MY LIFE — all but one — have escaped restrictions of time and place and have arranged themselves, undated, in an intricate mosaic of memories, which can be instantly evoked by such small things as a scrap of tinsel or the smell of pine trees. When this occurs, I see the Christmases of my childhood as vividly as on the moment of awakening. I hear sleigh bells and Christmas carolers and see magnificently trimmed trees, ceiling tall and glittering with lights. With one exception, there are no religious associations with early Christmases — my father was an agnostic. But the Christmas of the year that I turned five stands alone, not part of the mosaic.

Winter of 1906 came late to Logan, Utah, the small Rocky Mountain town where I grew up. The mild autumn weather had held through Thanksgiving, but next day large feathery flakes began to fall and continued, silent and relentless, for days. When at last they stopped, volunteers turned out to clear the sidewalks, leaving snow banks so high that when Bishop Newbold passed on his way to the Fourth Ward meeting house all I could see from our parlor window was the tip of his black hat.

The feel of Christmas was in the air at once, and the sound and fragrance of it, too, as college boys, with sleigh bells jingling, swept down Canyon Road with loads of fresh-cut trees. Papa bought a fine one for a quarter, and we decorated it with last year's trimmings and a new star for the tip. Mama started making fruitcake and plum puddings, letting me shell the walnuts and chop the candied orange peel. Everything was just the same as usual — except that I was worried over Mama. Her feet and hands were swollen — she'd had her wedding ring filed off. She'd taken to wearing her kimono all day, till time for Papa to come home from Brigham Young College where he was a professor, and every day he brought a sack of grapes which she kept in the ice-box, for herself alone. It wasn't like Mama not to share.

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Sunday of Christmas week, Grandpa, whom I actually suspected of being Santa Claus, took me riding in his fancy new sleigh. Once beyond the village limits he gave the horse a smart flick with his whip, and we went flying through a soft white world to the music of sleigh bells and the sight of bare poplar trees against the winter sky.

When Grandpa brought me home, Mama was in the parlor with Sister Ricks, a neighbor with a pale angelic face and an ugly goiter. "That child's got a fever," she said and went in the bathroom for a thermometer. It registered 104, and Mama immediately telephoned Dr. Budge. Sister Ricks sent me upstairs, telling me to take off my clothes and get into bed without my nightgown. After a while she came up with a washtub containing two dozen two-quart Mason jars packed tight full of snow, which she put in bed around me. By the time Dr. Budge arrived, my chest was hurting and my throat was sore. He said I was very sick — la grippe.

For several days I was delirious. Then one night I awakened to the sound of choirs singing. Sister Ricks was dozing in her chair. From the window I could see the Fourth Ward meeting house ablaze with lights. I got out of bed, made it to the door, and clinging to the banister, crept downstairs.

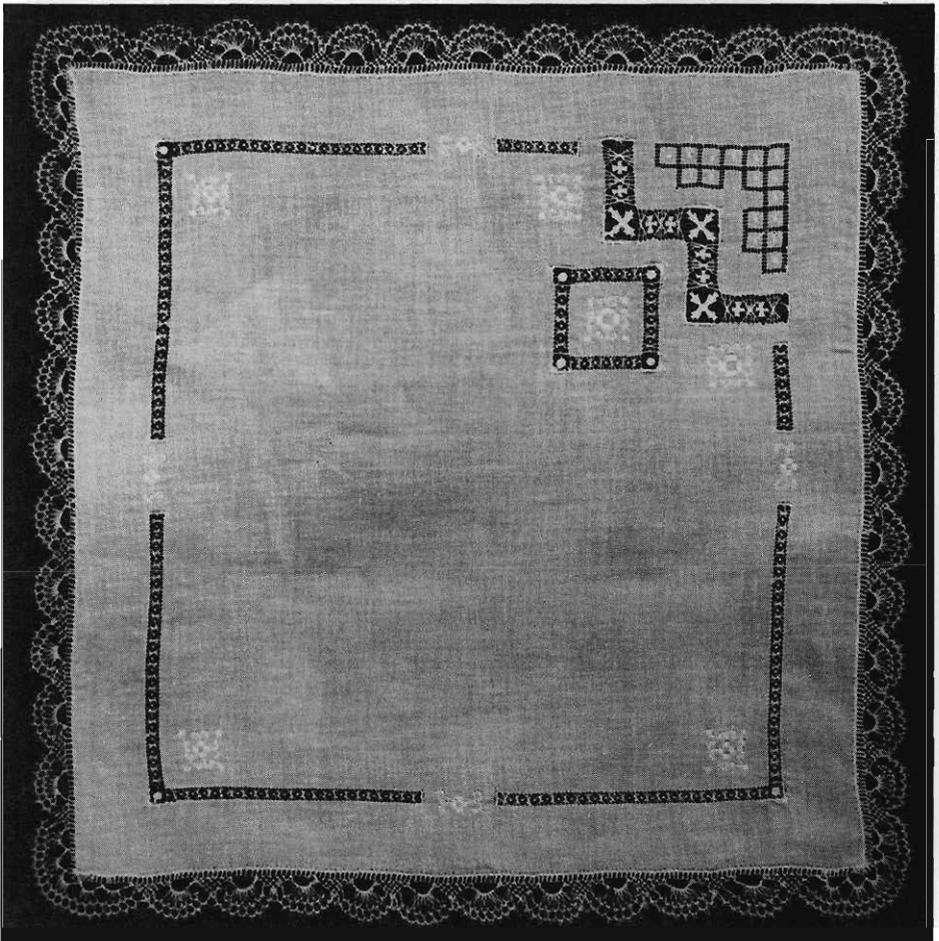
As I lifted my hand to turn the doorknob I heard an agonizing groan and then another. Through the crack I could see Mama lying on the bed, her dark hair fanned out on the pillow. Papa was sitting by her, Aunt Rachel was holding a basin of blue water in which Dr. Budge was washing his hands. On the far side of Mama's bed was — no, I wasn't dreaming — the cradle from the attic that Mama had said was brought across the plains by the handcart pioneers. Shaking with fear, I crawled into the room and tried to hide.

There was another groan — the worst yet, then another and another and another. Dr. Budge kept telling Mama to press down, and Papa, looking awfully worried, had moved away. All of a sudden Dr. Budge was holding up by its feet a baby boy. He spanked it once. A second time. Aunt Rachel said, "Dear God, let it breathe." Then she saw me. Jerking me to my feet, she marched me to the hall and out onto the porch. Pointing to the meeting house, she said, "Tell the bishop to come. A baby's dying."

In no time I was pounding on the big doors of the meeting house. Eventually they opened from the inside. Past the usher, down the chapel aisle I ran and up onto the platform. The choir kept on singing. I pulled the bishop to his feet, and he came with me down the aisle, grabbing his hat as we flew through the vestibule. He ran ahead of me down the block, and I, determined to be fair, cried after him, "My father's not a Mormon, you know." Aunt Rachel met him at the gate.

I arrived in time to see Mama give the limp and tiny figure to the bishop. Holding it in one big hand, without even warming it, he placed the other one on the baby's chest, closed his eyes and began — I supposed — to pray. I was watching Mama's face. There never was again or ever will be for me a more agonizing moment. Then, gradually my mother's face grew beautiful once more, Papa put his arm around her, Aunt Rachel said, "God be praised," Dr. Budge said, "I'll be damned," and my little brother let out a lusty yell.

My father stood up and shook hands with the bishop, and I, who in a few short moments had beheld the miracle of birth and death and resurrection, knew that things would never be the same again. I went upstairs alone. Sister Ricks was still dozing in her chair. Out there, the meeting house was still ablaze with lights, and the choir was still singing. In a little while it would be Christmas morning — 1906.



Needlelace-edged handkerchief, Melva Emrazian (Salt Lake City, Utah), 13½" square, cotton thread, 1988; (Utah) State Art Collection.