

THE Christmas I Treasure Most

By CATHERINE MARSHALL

Author of "A Man Called Peter,"
"Beyond Ourselves," and "Friends with God"



Why was her father so intent on making it a perfect yuletide? When this famous author found out, the holiday truly became a memorable one for her

CERTAIN CHRISTMASES tower above others in memory. In our family, one of the most unforgettable will always be that of 1960.

The setting was the century-old farmhouse in Virginia where my parents have lived since Father's retirement from the ministry. For weeks the nine grandchildren had been looking forward to Christmas on the farm: plenty of room to roam inside and out the old house, which was set in boxwood and surrounded by 125 beautifully rolling acres.

We knew that during most of December the preparations had been under way at *Evergreen*. The big farm kitchen would be fragrant with baking cookies and fruitcake. There would be a fire in the fireplace with its raised hearth and its Dutch tiles.

The round center table in the kitchen would be continuously in use, not just for cooking but for addressing Christmas cards, for making wreaths, for wrapping jellies and cookies for gifts—a hundred uses. And on all these activities the blue

and white Danish Christmas plates would be looking down from the walls on which they hung; this was their season.

Meanwhile we knew that Father had been getting the boxes of Christmas ornaments from the attic, testing out the strings of lights—especially his favorite bubble lights. He had been scouting *Evergreen's* acres for the perfect tree to cut. In his judgment, it must be cedar (what would Christmas be without the fragrance of cedar?), and it must touch the ceiling. He also had been busy in his workshop making something special. He was mysterious about it: "They'll be the first thing you see when you come into the driveway."

On that day before Christmas we saw them: a group of life-sized children carolers dressed in bright red robes. They were grouped around the lantern post at the end of the driveway. Even the lantern wore a holly wreath.

And as our three younger children tumbled out of the package-laden car (Peter John was to drive down separately from college), Suzie, the huge St. Bernard, came rushing to greet us with bells jingling from her collar. Yes, Father had been

hard at work—no question about it.

For as far back as we three children could remember, the yuletide season had been especially important to Father. Always he had regarded Christmas as the crown of the year's family activities. What we did not know was that this year he had felt an inner compulsion to create for his family the one perfect time.

Something of his mood must have communicated itself to me. For during the next few days I kept remembering scenes—like a kaleidoscope of the years past . . .

THERE WAS that first remembered Christmas of my Mississippi childhood when Father had dressed up and played Santa for our Peace Street neighborhood. He had the right voice and laugh for the role—booming, jolly. That booming voice always will be one of the vivid memories of my childhood.

That was the same year that he had spent weeks building doll furniture for my gift: a white bed with four posts, a dresser with drawers with glass knobs and a swinging mirror, a cupboard



Candlelight played on the children's faces as they tried to understand their grandfather: he had just said he would not be with the family next year.

with glass doors above the storage space below.

Father had a weakness for tools and gadgets and a talent for making and fixing things. He was generous in using this talent along with much of his time for us children. When we had wanted to play croquet, Father not only helped us construct the court but even strung lights over it so we could invite our friends to play after dark. When I had wanted a wild-flower garden, it was Father who helped me prepare the little plot of ground. When I had gotten interested in moths, Dad had made butterfly nets and wing stretchers for me. When I had wanted a tree house, it was Father who built one for me in the cherry tree by the garage.

With these projects we developed a pattern: I had plenty of ideas; Dad helped me to implement them. Because he and Mother entered so deeply into our lives and interests, for us children there was never any doubt about our being loved. As I remembered all this, I knew that this had been the surest undergirding for life any parents could have given to their children.

Then, too, during those days at the farm, I

kept remembering the family traditions which had developed through the years, many of them Christmas customs. We had always gone all-out with decorating—greens all the way up the stairs, on every newel post, on every mantel. There were always lights around the front door and entwined in live evergreens in the yard. And many wreaths; we made them all.

MAKING THINGS together always had been a big part of the tradition. All of the family participated in making apple butter and mince meat, in cracking and shelling nuts and cutting up fruit for fruitcake and our recipe for date-nut roll.

Then after we had begun spending our summers on Cape Cod, the making and giving of beach-plum jelly became one of our traditions. Finding the beach plums in out-of-the-way places in the Cape's sandy soil and gathering them was a family affair. There would follow the pots of cooking plums . . . the night of straining them . . . dozens of juice glasses all over the kitchen counters filled with the jelly, a glorious deep cranberry color when held up to the light.

At the end of the summer the carefully packed jelly would be carted back to Washington. Near Christmas, while we wrapped each glass in cellophane, we would be remembering the tang of the sea wind that day we had gathered the plums and all the fun we had making it.

And what would Christmas dinner be without our reindeer centerpiece—those six beautiful reindeer once made by skilled and loving German hands? Or how could the spirit of the Christ Child ever get inside our hearts without much playing and singing of carols and, for many evenings, the reading aloud of the beloved stories—like the Christmas passage from *Five Little Peppers and How They Grew*, Louisa May Alcott's *Christmas at Orchard House*, Leo Tolstoy's *Where Love Is, There Is God Also*, and Henry Van Dyke's *The First Christmas Tree*?

Another family tradition was our family service on Christmas Eve after the hanging up of the stockings. The children would help prepare for it, and it was a rule that everyone must participate.

That year of 1960 Lynn and Linda prepared an improvised altar before the living-room fireplace.

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