

Once Upon a Christmas

by John Purcell

The rain had fallen all morning, making the road to the cemetery at Holston Ridge a sea of mud that mired the truck down to its axles. Whenever the jarring motion stopped and a whirling whine echoed through the surrounding woods, the guards would first motion at Alfred with the stocks of their rifles.

"Get off the flatbed now, Alfred. The wheels is calling your name," they said, as the other convicts laughed.

Alfred, huddled near the edge of the flatbed, would look up slowly at the guards, his gaunt face twitching around the corners of his eyes and mouth.

"You know, I was just gettin' ready to push," he said, and swung his manacled legs over the edge of the flatbed, pushing off with his belly. His feet landed wrong in the mud and he fell flat on his face. The convicts screamed with laughter.

"Somebody help poor little Alfred," one of them said, "God knows the poor bastard can't do nothin' by himself."

Trembling from the December cold, Alfred pulled himself from the thick sludge and began to force his shoulder against the rear of the truck in an awkward bobbing motion. The guards pushed a few other convicts off the truck.

"Help him out," they said, "and try not to make him look any more foolish."

Once freed, the truck rattled on up the road, grinding to a stop outside of the Sullivan County cemetery gates. The convicts crawled off the flatbed and assembled themselves in a row in front of the guards. One of them spoke.

"Can't any of you fellas tell us why we's out on a work detail the day 'for Christmas? Diggin' graves ain't nothing to be doing on Christmas Eve," he said, brushing the dried mud from his pants leg.

"Don't seem like to me you got a whole lot of say in the matter. Seems like to me you oughta do as you're told and shut up about it," answered one of the guards, fingering the trigger on his rifle. "Somebody's gotta dig them graves. You ain't gonna get no grave digger to do it, not this time of year. The sooner you get 'em done, the sooner we can get outa here."

Another guard went back to the flatbed, returning with an armful of rusty shovels.

"I hear we's diggin' graves for them dead children," one of the convicts offered. "Ain't that what we's doin', Mr. Nathan?"

The guard with the rifle cleared his throat and spat on the ground. "Is that what you hear, boy? Who you been talkin' to?"

"Nobody special," the convict answered, his voice raspy. "Just talkin' 'round the yard. I just heared we was goin' to dig the graves for them children killed in that fire. Maybe I heared wrong."

"Yeah, maybe you did," the guard said. He walked closer to the convict and spoke to him in a low voice. "And maybe you oughta be a little careful about who you listen to. Sometimes things ain't meant to be heard." The convict

stepped back away from him, nodding slightly. The other guard began handing out the shovels to every other man in the line.

"Now, then, gen-tle-men," the guard with the rifle said, "we have been ordered by the warden himself to dig four graves up along the far north ridge there before dark this evenin'. Now if you good gen-tle-men cooperates, we can get done sooner, and get outta this goddam' cold and get offa this goddam' ridge. Any of you find that unappealin'?"

A few scattered "nahs" and "uh-uhs" broke the silence. "Good," the guard continued, "'cause we's aheadin' up there right now. Henry, get our good friend Alfred there to carry the lime. He can be our 'limer.'" The other guard hauled a forty pound bag of lime out of the truck and tossed it to Alfred. The bag caught him full in the chest and knocked him to the ground. They all laughed at him.

"Now Alfred," said the guard in his best schoolmaster voice, "since you's the best at mental work, we'll let you square off the graves so's we know where to dig. All you gotta do is make a line with the lime. Think you can do that?"

Alfred nodded and said, "Sure can. I've done it for years." He stood up with the bag and positioned it on his shoulder. "I dug plenty graves."

The guard stared at him. "I'm sure you have, boy." He faced the other convicts, and smiled a sick grin. "Lead the way, Alfred. We'll follow." The group watched as Alfred hobbled along the path through the cemetery gates.

As they reached the top of the north ridge, the wind became colder and made the cedars crackle in the bitter air. The guards ordered Alfred to square off four graves under a small grove of cedars, all in a row. Alfred reached into the lime bag and spread out four perfect rectangles, each the exact duplicate of the other, each spaced a proper five paces apart. After he had finished lining the last grave, he walked over and placed the bag at the feet of the guard.

"All done," Alfred said quietly as he stood in front of him. "Whatta I do now?"

The guard grabbed a shovel from one of the convicts and handed it to him. "You show us how to dig," he said.

Alfred took the shovel and walked to where he had outlined the final grave. Laboriously he began to chop off sections of turf with his shovel and toss them to the side.

"What the hell ya watchin' for," the guard yelled at the convicts. "If a gimp like him can dig that good, it shouldn't be no problem for the rest of ya. Get to work!"

The convicts dug at the graves until long shadows passed across the ridge from an encroaching storm. Alfred had dug at least six feet down now, and stood at the bottom of the grave while he worked to smooth the walls down with his shovel. Overhead the skies darkened as the howl from the wind blocked out the sound from the other convicts. He felt the single cold rain-drops begin to sting the back of his neck more and more frequently until suddenly the sky opened a flow of ice-cold rain on him. He heard the guards' cries of "Get out of the graves," but the downpour made the walls of the grave so slippery he had difficulty getting a foothold, even with the shovel. By now the sky was so dark that he couldn't see out of the grave and he screamed for someone to help him. But his frail voice couldn't be heard over the roar of the storm. As he made one final attempt to get out, he sensed that the walls were beginning to crumble around him. Terrified, he began to scramble madly at one wall while the other slowly oozed around his ankles,

locking him in place. He tried to squirm loose, but a heavy slab of dirt fell on his hip and pinned him down. A long, agonized wail escaped from his throat as the mud slowly covered him over.

Above, the guards yelled for the convicts to cover the graves with canvas tarpins, shouting for the men to line up so they could begin the descent down the hill. One of the guards realized that Alfred was missing and ran over to the grave. By this time Alfred had been completely covered by the collapsing walls so that in the darkness the grave appeared empty. The guard shouted to his companion.

"Henry! Alfred ain't here! I can't find him."

"Whatta you mean, you can't find him?" the other screamed, waving his rifle furiously in the downpour. "He's in the grave!"

"Nah, he ain't in here, I tell ya," said the first guard, "he musta got out."

The downpour increased, falling so heavy that it formed small streams around the guard's feet.

"Christ, it don't matter anymore," the other guard yelled. "We just gotta get outta here now or we ain't never gonna get that truck back to the prison. We'll come back and find that gimp later. He can't go far."

The guard with the rifle motioned for the line of prisoners to move forward. The group fled quickly down the hill as the winds roared through the pines overhead.

Alone in the grave, Alfred found that he was quickly suffocating from the mud creeping into his nostrils. He felt the mud constricting around his body like some boa squeezing the lifeblood out of him. Violently he wriggled his body, twisting his limbs this way and that to try and weaken the bond of heavy earth. He rotated his head as if he were a blind worm working his way to the surface, feeling with his nose, filled with fetid odor of the clinging mud. Finally his face broke through. Next his shoulders shook loose, followed by his arms and shortly thereafter, his hands. With them loose, he was able to dig out his hips and legs, and with much difficulty, he managed to stand.

The rain had ceased, and the air had become much colder. A few solitary stars appeared through the clouds above, flickering brightly. For a moment Alfred stood in utter amazement, because he felt as if God had given him rebirth from the grave so that he might fulfill some mighty purpose. Never before in his life had he felt that his existence had meaning, but now he knew it with a certainty that transcended all understanding. God would not have saved me from this grave, Alfred thought, unless he had planned some wonderful things for my life.

With a new-found strength, he dug out the half-buried shovel and stuck it deep into one of the more sturdy walls of the grave. Using it as a stand, he crawled onto it and hoisted himself up over the edge of the hole. Once out, he kneeled in front of the grave and prayed.

"Heavenly father," he whispered, "who has carried me from my grave and freed my soul from bondage, I thank you."

At that moment Alfred looked up, and it finally dawned on him that he was alone. Not only had God freed him from the grave, but he had freed him from prison as well! He struggled up from his knees and shouted to the heavens.

"God, I am free now! I am finally free!" He stared at the foreboding blackness of the woods, through which he could see the distant lights of Trubury, a small town about a mile and a half away. The light seemed to him an oracle, a shining beacon calling him forth to perform miracles, just like Jesus had done. And why not? Hadn't both he and Jesus been raised from the dead? Hadn't both he and Jesus been reviled and persecuted? Alfred began to shake spasmodically from the cold, his mind racing from inference to

conclusion. As his vision blossomed, he muffled an almost hysterical laugh, as much from some perverted joy as from unearthly fear. His realization was complete. He was the Christ! All his life he had wondered why he had suffered so, why he had been born deformed, why he had no father. God was his father! All of the pain had been nothing but a trial. And he was victorious!

"Hosannah!" cried Alfred to the darkness. "Blessed be he who comes in the name of the Lord!" He fell on his knees again, his arms stretched out in supplication to the heavens. "My father," he wept, "my father, your will be done."

A wind stirred the pines, and he was certain that the groaning of the limbs carried the voice of God. Over and over he heard them creak, "Go, go, go." And from that instant, he knew what his Father wanted him to do.

"Yes, yes," said Alfred, "I will go to Trubury, and proclaim Your glory. On this most holiest of nights, I will go to Trubury and tell them that Jesus is born—in me! Thy will be done!" Vaulting clumsily off his knees, he crawled across the muddy ground and pulled himself up by a cedar branch. Frantically he scuttled down the hill toward the sleeping town of Trubury.

Trubury lay stiller that night than had the town of Bethlehem so many centuries before it. The sky had begun to cloud over again and a soft dusting of snow drifted down upon the streets, the occasional breeze making the flakes dance about in spinning wind-devils under the streetlights. Alfred was trudging through a near-by field, one that sat behind the First Evangelical Episcopalian Church, singing Christmas carols in his rough, off-key voice. Upon reaching the locked front doors of the church, he noticed that the custodian had left open a small basement window to the left of the steps. He got down on his hands and knees and, forcing the window open wide enough to enable his body to pass through, crawled into the basement room.

Down in the basement was a storehouse for the church, containing stacks of hymnals, classroom chalkboards, folded chairs, and in the corner, a large stack of robes. Still trembling from the bone-numbing cold, Alfred walked over to the corner and picked up one of the robes. It was obviously a costume from a passion play of sorts; it was a long, flowing red robe with a golden-tasseled cord around the waist, a regal robe worthy only of a man of great stature. Underneath the robe sat a long, straight white beard with little hooks that fit around the ears. Alfred let out a cry of delight and immediately put on the beard and slipped on the robe, which bunched around his ankles because of its great length, causing the border of the robe to drag along the ground like a royal train. Now he felt he truly looked the role of messiah. Now he was truly ready to march through the streets of Trubury and proclaim the good news of his coming to the world. Their Redeemer had returned!

Struggling back out through the basement window, Alfred headed down the sidewalk where the church was located to the main street of the town, singing every Christmas hymn he knew. Lights in the houses went on, dogs barked at him, people yelled "Shut up!" at him from their bedroom windows, but on he sang, punctuating the end of each song with the declaration, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand!" His uneven gait made many people presume him drunk, and they greeted him with cries of "Drink a toast for me, St. Nick" as he passed.

Having reached the end of town, he sat down on the curb and rested. There, across the street from him, stood the Bollingbrook Children's Home, where he had spent a good part of his childhood accepting scorn and ridicule. Part of the upper floor appeared to have been damaged by fire. Alfred recognized immediately the cause of the fire—God's wrath. Yes, thought Alfred, the sins of fathers visited on the children, so be it. And then,

shivering in the chilling night air, he understood. He knew the reason they had to dig the graves. For the children who died, didn't the man say? In the fire? A faint wave of pity washed over him, and grew, until he was overwhelmed with the sorrow of it. But in that sorrow an idea cut through, an idea that glowed in his forehead somewhere behind his eyes like a bright coal.

"Father," whispered Alfred, "give me your strength. Give me your strength to raise them children from the dead. I have suffered for this, Father. You know how I have suffered. Glorify me now, Lord. Glorify me in front of them people, so's they'll know I'm your son." He knelt in front of a fire hydrant and repeated the words, "Please, father" for a few minutes; then, with a new sense of resolve, he rose and walked across the street to the home.

From a bedroom window, two of the children in the orphanage saw Alfred nearing the front door. One of the children ran screaming "Santa Claus, Santa Claus!" down the hall corridor, waking the other children and Mrs. Aster, the home guardian. She grabbed the little boy by the waist and shook him.

"What's gotten into you, Jimmy? Is this some kind of a joke?"

"No, Mrs. Aster," Jimmy said breathlessly, "I saw him."

"Don't you lie to me now," she said, sticking her stern gray face a few inches away from his, "or I'll wallop you good."

"It ain't no lie, ma'am," he said, his excitement brought down by the tightening grip she had on his shoulder.

At that moment, a loud pounding sound rang through the house.

"That's him now," Jimmy said, "I know it is!"

"It ain't nothin' of the kind," she answered, "now get back into bed."

Jimmy, and the other children who were carefully peeking out the doors of their rooms, followed Mrs. Aster's instructions until she turned and headed for the door. Then they quietly followed her.

When she answered the door, Alfred burst into the room, pushing her aside. "Woman," he said loudly, "before you you see your salvation!" The children giggled softly behind her.

"You get outa here right now or I'm calling the police," Mrs. Aster hissed at him. "And you," she said, turning to the children behind her back, "get to bed, or there's gonna be hell to pay."

"Woman," he continued, "the kingdom of hell is within you." The children giggled again. "And don't you yell at them children. Didn't I once say, let the little ones come to me?"

"Such blasphemous talk," she said, "to be talkin' in front of the children. You ain't Jesus. And on Christmas. I'm calling the police!" She turned to walk away.

He grabbed her by the arm, "Woman, you don't understand, do you? I come to raise the dead."

She looked at him fearfully. "You're a crazy man. You burst in here in them funny clothes, and say hurtful things about the children, God rest 'em. You're a crazy man!" She struggled to release herself from his grip.

"Tell the children I have a story to tell them, my story, the story of the new Jesus," Alfred said, his body trembling with emotion.

"Aren't you Santa Claus?" asked Jimmy, peering around the parlour curtains.

"He ain't Santa Claus, he ain't Jesus, he ain't nothing," screamed Mrs. Aster, "he's just a dirty old crazy man!"

Alfred yanked Mrs. Aster toward him, choking her with the crook of his arm.

"Now, children," he said, his breathing heavy with each word, "I'll tell you a story. Once upon a Christmas the Son of God was raised from his grave to give God honor. Before he died he was a cripple, a nothing," he eyed Mrs.

Aster furiously, "but after God raised him from the dead, he adopted him as His Son." The room was silent except for the monotonous sound of a grandfather clock. Alfred's face beamed brightly.

"I am that Son. I can raise them children who died here from the dead."

"It's a lie," Mrs. Aster said, "a filthy lie!" She wrenched herself free from his grip and ran out the door screaming for help.

"Come, children," Alfred said, "let's go and do God's will." He walked slowly out the door and across the lawn. Mrs. Aster had managed to wake a neighbor who accompanied her back to the house with a shotgun.

"There, that's him," she said frantically, "that's him. He's the crazy man who assaulted me."

"Don't try to go anywhere," the neighbor said, "or you'll be sorry."

Alfred walked directly toward the man with the gun.

"You better stop, mister, or I'll shoot you," the man said, "I swear to God I will."

"You swear to me?" Alfred smiled, and reached forward to grab the barrels of the shotgun. The blast from it blew off his face, and his body flew through the air like an unstrung marionette.

"Jesus Christ," the man said, his hands shaking, his eyes glazed, "Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ."

"He said he could raise them children, them poor dead children. But it was a lie, a stinking lie." She became hysterical. "He couldn't raise them children, nobody can, nobody. . . ." Her words broke off into a muffled sob.

A small voice came from behind her. "Mrs. Aster . . ."

She turned quickly to see a young boy standing behind her. His eyes searched her with all the hurt of innocence betrayed.

"Why wouldn't you let him try," he said.

The Non-Sexist Traffic Jam

by Beth Hampton

"Move your car or I'll move it for you!" the angry person depersoned. "You have awful personners, young person," exclaimed the grey-headed old person. "Why don't you try to be a little more huperson," it added. "Oh, shut up and mind your own business," was the angry young person's counter comperson. The person in the stalled car got out and said, "I think there's something wrong with the personifold." "Is this car personal?" asked the angry person. "No," said the person with the stalled car. "It's automatic." "Well, we'd better move this car before traffic gets even worse," whined the angry person. It picked up the car and moved it to the side of the road. "Wow, did you see that?" exclaimed the person from the stalled car. "That person is an Itcules. It must take vitapersons!" "What are you babbling about?" said the old grey-headed person. "That person just picked up my car and moved it," said the person from the stalled car, excitedly. "Didn't you see it?" "No," responded the old grey-headed person. "I think you're full of personure."