

The Dundee Cake

MAGGIE BEATTY BLAINE used to love Christmas. Ever since her 1840 marriage to John Blaine, the couple had celebrated by going to church Christmas morning, having a celebratory dinner at home, doing a kindness to a neighbor or a stranger, and concluding the day by singing carols around the piano.

She had been nineteen years old in 1840. Her pale skin had glowed, her hazel eyes were bright, and her auburn hair glossy. She was young, innocent, and full of hope.

But now it was December 1852. She felt much older than her thirty-one years and oh, so weary. For on February 20th of 1850, she had lost her beloved John and their dear little son Gideon. Now, not quite two years later, the shadows of those losses crept steadily upon her as Christmas approached.

It was, in fact, only a few days away. This time Maggie not only was facing the third holiday without John and Gideon, but also the first without Aunt Letty, John's aunt. The older woman had been her rock and was the one who had advised her to start a boarding house. Side by side they energetically had tackled the backbreaking tasks of feeding four male boarders, keeping the house clean, and handling the laundry and mending. But in June, Aunt Letty suddenly passed away from heart failure at the age of fifty-eight. Now life for Maggie was a grim, exhausting struggle.

Somehow, though, she managed to maintain a bright countenance for the sake of her daughters, ten-year-old Lydia and six-year-old Frances, also known as Frankie. Maggie wanted to make the holiday meaningful and joyful for her collection of solitary male boarders, too. They consisted of Grandpa O'Reilly, a man of no defined job who scraped to bring something resembling rent to Maggie every week; writer Chester Carson whose best days seemed to be behind him; and two young apprentice lawyers, Geoffrey Illington, and Lucius Kemp.

Sadly, Maggie was not much of a landlady when it came to making money. She could have found men with the wherewithal to pay her both weekly and well. But every one of the boarders had come to her hungry, cold, lost or helpless, and the idea of turning them away horrified her. The Methodist Maggie took seriously Jesus' teachings, particularly the one that said that whoever fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, cared for the sick, or visited the imprisoned did the same for him. Thus she unfailingly saw Jesus in all who came to her door, welcomed them to her rooming house, and took them into her family. She may not have been paid in cash, but she was richly compensated in love and respect.

Of course, love and respect did not pay her bills.

It was not yet time to start the noon dinner and since she had finished scrubbing the kitchen and hall floors, Maggie retreated to her bedroom for a few minutes of solitude and rest.

Wrapping her shawl close, she took a seat on the chair in front of her writing desk, opened its drawer, and took out her journal. She had started writing a journal after the death of her loved ones. Somehow it helped to fill the pages with her sorrows, her hopes, her fears, her joys, and her prayers.

Maggie opened the book to the last entry. A blank page was next to it. She picked up her pen, dipped it in the inkwell, and began to write on the fresh page.

December 20, 1852

Early this morning I sat and looked out one of the front parlor windows. The sky was like lead and snow sifted gently down like flour. The window affords a fine view of Blaineton's square and the houses and streets surrounding it. At that hour, all was peaceful and sleepy, as if the world were ever a quiet place. But it is not. If it were, I would be welcoming the approach of Christmas rather than dreading it.

Many of the houses on the square were built in the middle of the last century. John's ancestors, the founders of Blaineton, lived across the way from this one. It grew from a humble dwelling to a building with two floors and a new wing. People unrelated live there now, John's family moved to a large new house on the southern outskirts when their carriage manufactory became prosperous.

My people never lived in the town at all. We started out on a little farm north of Blaineton. In the last century, our people were far from well-to-do. Until they too started a carriage business, it was a hardscrabble existence for them, and they were well-versed in tragedy and loss.

I wonder how long their hearts ached after each sad event.

I want to be brave, Journal. I want to be resilient but, oh, I still miss my John and our little Gideon so. And now dear Aunt Liddy is gone!. All I do these days is work until my hands are raw and my back aches. I worry whether I'll be able to pay the bills. My boarders, God bless them, are good-hearted, and pay rent when they can, but it never seems enough to cover all the expenses. Most nights I cry because I do not know what to do or where to turn. I fear my courage and strength have been shattered along with my complacent belief that life would be untroubled.

For comfort I read the Bible 'til my eyes can take no more and pray until I fall asleep. I search for something, anything that resembles solace, but when solace comes it never stays long.

And now Christmas is nearly upon us once again.

Dear Lord, I have nothing to give my daughters. Nothing! I cannot even purchase enough yarn to knit hats or stockings or mittens for them. And there is barely money to feed my boarders. I cannot purchase a Christmas goose nor the fruits necessary for the Dundee cake. What shall I do?

Please help me, Lord. You were born in poverty. You lived in poverty. You died a criminal. You've known far worse than I ever will know. O, help me find a way, my Jesus. Help me find a way.

With a sigh, Maggie blotted the page and closed the book. Then she got up and went downstairs to help Emily start dinner.

*

In September, she had found herself exhausted trying to shoulder the heavy work of a boarding house on her own. So Maggie had looked for help. She ended up hiring Emily Johnson to help with the cooking and cleaning. Emily was as tall as Maggie but with skin the color of milky hot chocolate, deep brown hair, and amber eyes. She usually braided her hair, collecting them into a bun at the back of her head. When they had heavy work to do, she would wear a scarf, something Maggie also did, in an effort to stay tidy.

Emily was shy at first, keeping her eyes down and doing her work with nary a word. But every day after the dinner dishes were done, Maggie would sit down and have a cup of tea for a brief rest. And every day she would invite Emily to join her. And every day Emily would sit quietly and sip her tea, while Maggie talked and asked questions which Emily answered with one or two words. Eventually, though the darker woman's shyness melted and she began to speak in full sentences.

Three months later, though, Maggie still did not know much of Emily's life apart from the Second Street Boarding House. She did learn that Emily was married to a man named Nate, short for Nathaniel and that he had a carpenter shop on Depot Street. Maggie also discovered that Emily's mother had brought her north from Maryland. Since Maryland was a slave state, Maggie wondered if Emily's mother was a free woman or an escaped slave. If a slave, she wondered what privations the woman had faced bringing herself and her baby to freedom. Since Emily had said nothing more, the answer remained shrouded.

Like some Methodists, Maggie was an abolitionist. Her one luxury was a subscription to a newspaper called *The National Era*, a weekly antislavery publication from Washington, DC. During her infrequent spare time she devoured it and had read with great interest a serialized story by Harriet Beecher Stowe called "Uncle Tom's Cabin." In March of 1852, the tale was printed in novel form, and everyone seemed to be talking about it. Since Maggie did not have the money to buy the book, she was pleased to read the story in

serial form and was prepared to comment should someone ask her. No one ever did, though.

Maggie long had been against slavery, but after reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, she had become passionately abolitionist. In her eyes enslaved people were part of the human race and thus children of God. It was beyond her comprehension how one group of people could treat another as a commodity and not as fellow human beings.

She glanced at Emily as they put together a noon dinner of canned green beans and fatback, cornbread, stewed tomatoes, ham, and eggs. Once again, Maggie wondered about Emily's mother and once again chose not to say anything. To make conversation she said, "I hope this is enough cornbread," as she pulled a pan out of the oven.

"And I hope some of those men pay you their rent," Emily replied. "Mrs. Blaine, you know you can't provide room and board on thin air." Emily was nothing if not practical.

"I know," the other woman sighed. "And please call me Maggie. Although I pay you, we do work side by side."

Emily smiled slightly. "Very well, Maggie." And, with a wicked little grin, she added, "And you may call me Mrs. Johnson."