

The Christmas Eve Visitor

“This is not Christmas!” Frankie Blaine punched down the bread dough with a vengeance, but it didn’t make her feel any better. Unruly, wavy strands of red hair had escaped her braid, and she irritably pushed them away from her face, leaving traces of flour on her forehead.

“You’re right,” her sister, Lydia Blaine Lape replied as she stood by the stove. “It’s not Christmas.” Her brown eyes crinkled as she teased, “It’s Christmas *Eve*.”

“Oh, you know what I mean.” Frankie went back to pummeling the dough. “We’re practically down to our last penny, so we can’t make a decent Christmas pudding. We can’t afford presents. I couldn’t even scrape up enough money to buy yarn to knit stockings! And now the children are sick.”

Lydia lifted the lid to a pot of chicken soup and sampled it with a spoon. “At least this is tasty. And it will be good for them. Chicken soup always is.”

Frankie stopped what she was doing and glared at her sister. Why was it that Lydia’s brown hair always stayed neat, regardless of whether it was in a bun or a braid? “I remember when Mama ran the boarding house, there were times when we hardly had any money. But we still had a real Christmas dinner and afterward, we went to help those less fortunate.”

“There wasn’t a war then.” Lydia’s heart contracted. *There wasn’t a war then and my husband had been alive*. She shook herself out of it. She was done with crying.

Frankie grunted. “Eighteen sixty-three has been nothing but trouble.” She slammed her fist into the dough. “I can’t wait for 1864 to get here. It’s got to be better than this.”

“Try looking on the bright side, will you? At least we have one another.” *Everyone but Edgar, that is*. Once again, Lydia pushed the thought aside.

Frankie fell quiet, gently patting the mound of dough before her.

“What’s really troubling you?”

Frankie heaved a sigh. “The children all have fevers. What if the fevers turn into something else?”

Lydia knew full well what a fever and a cough could turn into in young children. She had seen enough of it working as a midwife and as a doctor’s assistant. “Yes,” she finally said. “That worries me, too. But I’ll do what I can if things take a turn for the worse. As for you, just keep praying.”

“I certainly can do that.” Frankie returned to kneading the bread.

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Maggie Blaine Smith’s Journal, 24 December 1863

My baby daughter is ill, Journal. Her nose is stuffy, and she is warmer than she should be. I don’t know what more I can do, aside from pray.

When we married, Eli and I wanted children, even though we were older. When we thought we could not birth one of our own, we adopted Bob, and then we were surprised when I conceived little Faith. But now that we have both our little ones, I tremble at the idea of them being taken from us. Must my heart be shattered to bits? How much must I bear? Must we bear? Eli lost his baby son and first wife within hours of each other. And he and I lost a baby of our own due to miscarriage. If anything should happen to Faith or Bob, or to both, it would break our hearts in two.

Journal, I know life does not come with guarantees. A woman can die in childbirth. An infant might never live to see its sixth birthday. There are fevers, diseases, and accidents. And now there is war. The world is perilous. Anything could take a child, or an adult for that matter. My John and our son Gideon died of rheumatic fever in 1850. I am thankful our two daughters were spared and have lived to become young women.

But, dear Lord, Faith is not even five weeks old. Is she strong enough to fight this fever? And Bob has suffered the loss of his parents – do not strike him down this way. Let him live and be happy.

My heart and soul are sorely troubled. I do not know what to think, what to pray, what to hope.

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Maggie sighed and put her pen down. Faith had begun to fuss. Reaching into the cradle, she lifted her daughter out and held her in her arms. The baby’s cheeks were pink.

“Shh, my love,” she whispered. “Shh...”

She could hear coughing coming from the room next to hers. It sounded like six-year-old Bob. But little Natey, who was only three and the son of her good friends Emily and Nate Johnson, had started coughing, too. Maggie tried not to dwell on the fact that in the blink of an eye a cough and a fever could turn into a deadly inflammation of the lungs and pleura.

Tormented, she put her head in her hand and prayed: *Oh, God, on this the eve of your Son's birth, please remember these children. Please give us joy. We have suffered so much.*

The battle of Gettysburg had been three intense days of fear and earth-shaking noise and blood and wounded men throughout their house. *Surely*, she thought, *we deserve some respite after what we have suffered.*

They may have deserved it, but on the eve of Christmas, Maggie's unconventional family could not be together. Frankie's beau, Patrick was in the army with the New Jersey Fifteenth Regiment. Lydia's husband Edgar had died of wounds suffered in battle. Chester Carson and Jim "Grandpa" O'Reilly, two of Maggie's oldest boarders, had opted to remain in Gettysburg. They were helping Lydia's midwife colleague at the infirmary for women that she and Lydia had started in the old Smith house. Their sacrifice had made it possible for Frankie and Lydia to spend Christmas with their mother and stepfather. As grateful as she was for that, Maggie still missed Mr. Carson and Grandpa. She missed Patrick, too. And she grieved for Edgar and for her daughter Lydia's bereavement.

They all were missing so many things they formerly had taken for granted.

Once Maggie had owned a boarding house in Blaineton, New Jersey. It had been a difficult life, but she saw to it that her establishment was filled with love. The people who lived there were her family.

But early in 1863, her home was burned down by a youthful gang of Copperheads who did not appreciate Maggie's friendship with people of color. They had been acting on rumors that the boarding was a station on the Underground Railroad. That fact that such hatred and anger could be directed at her and those she loved still stunned Maggie.

In a desire to protect the family, her husband Elijah Smith had moved the entire family to Gettysburg, where they had stayed in his old family home and helped his Quaker sisters assist fugitive slaves and refugee freemen.

And then the battle came.

Maggie had been pregnant with Faith at the time. Almost as soon as the fighting was over, Eli found his way into the town, learned of his wife's condition, and moved her yet again, hoping to give her peace and a healthier environment. Now they lived in Middletown, seven miles north of Gettysburg.

But now... what was it all for? It seemed that death and grief followed them no matter what. Would those things ever go away? Would they pause, even for a little while? Maggie wondered if she ever would feel secure and at peace again.

The door to the bedroom opened. Maggie looked up to find her husband standing in the doorway. She smiled, but he did not see it. His eyes were downcast as he thumped across the room with his cane.

Eli had been a newspaperman. Raised as a Quaker, he still retained a strong dislike of violence and war and desired to see the waters of justice roll

down for the poor and the outcast. Eli also was a free-thinker, someone who preferred to analyze, evaluate, and make up his own mind about the issues of the day. He no longer had – or more correctly claimed not to have – any firm religious beliefs.

And yet, somehow, he had married Maggie, who was a pious Methodist. Her generous heart, kind hazel eyes, and quiet smile had won him over from the first minute he had met her.