

Goodwill, care, generosity... you just might as well believe in Santa Claus.....!!

All the names, places and jobs in this story, have been factually taken from the 1881 Church Minshull census. The story is taken from...well you make your own mind up...!

'Twas the Sight before Christmas

It was mid-November 1888 and Mary Jackson woke up with three hungry sons to feed. Her husband had died four years earlier of Typhoid, a common killer in places where sanitation and clean drinking water are in short supply and Thomas senior was never one for washing his hands after mucking out, or clearing the cess pit, but it seemed that no section of society was spared anyway, as Prince Albert had contracted and died from it some years earlier.

Mary's late husband wasn't the best of spouses either, choosing to run the 105-acre Outlanes Farm with an iron fist and this extended to the children too. Childhood was rarely tolerated in his household and barely existed in many families, since children usually began a lifetime of hard labour as soon as they were capable of simple tasks.

The boys ages ranged from Thomas jnr.11, Edwin 9 and George who was only just 7. Their Dad had never been much more than a presence they feared. Whenever they heard his boots crunch on the gravel pathway leading to the farmhouse, they would scramble to hide under their beds.

In between long periods of drunkenness though, he did work the land, which managed to put food on the table and now that he was gone, yes, there would be no more beatings, but very little food too and definitely no money for any kind of treat.

By now, Mary was receiving Parochial Relief from St Bartholomew's Church, as there was no effective welfare system in place for someone in her circumstances and especially not in the rural areas of Cheshire, such as Church Minshull.

However, from time to time, the community rallied round to help her out in their own ways. Three years earlier, Robert Papa Pilgrim had brought shoes, sweets and firewood to her, along with a Christmas goose, but Mary was never one for self-pity or to take charitable acts for granted, she was, despite her slight frame, a strong-willed woman with a self determination to ensure her family survived the best way they could.

The Winter months were not the easiest time of year for the widow, tending the livestock became increasing difficult, to the point where she decided that, as the animals grew out their thick fluffy winter coats, they should be comfortable enough grazing outdoors during the winter. Ideally, when it snowed, they should have gone into the dilapidated barn, but at Outlanes farm, they would have to take care of themselves in the fields.

She applied the same stoic rationale to keeping warm. The boys were now old enough to chop, collect and store wood in the logstore, but when they were outside, they would put on layers of clothes, indeed it was harder in Summer to stay cool, than in Winter to stay warm, where they would just add another layer of wool. Since there wouldn't be any bathing in the Winter, they didn't have to worry about getting wet and catching a cold.

In the colder months, when there were no crops to tend and to try and make ends meet, she would take on other jobs, there was always work for someone willing to find it, such as washing clothes for other families when it's only 30F outside and trying to get everything dry without freezing. She'd also take on sewing work, such as quilt tops for bed coverings.

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Despite the hardship she had endured in her relatively short life so far, Mary was still a god-fearing, bible loving disciple of the church and she believed that previous events in her life, were designed by divinity to give her the strength she needed at times like these.

Mary attended St Bartholomew's church every Sunday without fail, to hear Reverend Joseph Richards deliver his weekly sermon and for the boys to listen to some of his stories, especially at this time of year as the themes would be based around human kindness at Christmas. Last year, he had told a short version of Charles Dickens's A Christmas Carol, which encapsulated the values of peace, goodwill and family. It also gave a new meaning to the 'Christmas Spirit' to the wide-eyed gullible children in the congregation that year.

But last Sunday, Mary thought Reverend Richards had told quite a bizarre poem called 'The Night Before Christmas', which had arrived from the Americas years earlier, based around a character called St Nicholas.

The Reverend had explained St Nicholas was a Dutch patron saint locally known as 'Sinterklaas', who was famous for his generous gifts to the poor and impoverished, but since the poem was now almost 40 years old, Sinterklaas was now known as 'Santa Claus'.

All the children in church that evening were starry-eyed in awe and wonderment at the prospect of a benevolent celestial being, who flies through the sky delivering gifts to people and children alike.

Mary chided the vicar that he was filling the children's minds with false idols and expectations, as the poem was all very fanciful and fantastical to her, "imagine", she bemoaned, "flying reindeers and a mystical man giving away toys and gifts all over the world in one night...what will the good Lord think...how am I supposed deal with the anticipations that you've put in my children's heads, when I can barely put food in their bellies...is this not sacrilege?"

"My dearest Mary" comforted the reverend, "the good Lord will always provide, but sacrilege?... no, December 25th is still the religious celebration of the birth of Jesus, but the spirit of Christmas is a wonderful extension of the values of love and generosity, which we all strive to live by... I'm sure the good Lord recognises that we can all have room for a Santa Claus in our lives, too..."

Mary wasn't entirely convinced by the vicar's words and all the way home she muttered to herself, "Santa Claus, indeed...I've never heard of such a notion of fantasy..."

But for now, Mary had other pressing concerns to worry about...her pockets had only a few meagre pennies and farthings; her larder was empty; and Christmas was just around the corner.

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The next day, she gathered the boys together and loaded them onto her rickety old cart, gee'd up her trusty horse, Leviticus and drove off in search of paid work. The four of them went to every farm, warehouse and store in the parish looking for a job, but no luck. The boys stayed, crammed in the cart and tried to be quiet while Mary tried to convince whoever would listen that she was willing to learn, or do anything. She had to have some work. Still no luck.

The last place she went to, just a few miles out of the village, was an old tannery. Harvey's Tannery was on Millstone Lane in Nantwich. Tanneries had such a powerful smell that they were usually located outside of the town, as tanning is a noxious and odoriferous trade.

With leather being such a crucial textile, from footwear and book bindings, to tack and harnesses, she thought there must be a need for extra hands, as demand for leather goods was high as ever in the largely horse-powered world.

As she drew into the courtyard, however, everyone was struck by a stench of dog dirt for some reason...?

When she enquired about work, she was directed up a set of stone steps through a darkened doorway. An old lady named Granny Harvey ran the place and she peeked out of the dirt stained window from time to time at the boys huddled in the cart.

She needed someone on the graveyard shift, 11 o'clock at night until 7 o'clock in the morning, to wash hides ready for the Tanners start of shift the next day.

Granny explained that skins and hides arrived at the tannery, bloody and wet with whatever animal remains still clung to them, so first, they were soaked in water to clean them. She paid sixpence farthing an hour and Mary could start that night.

Mary raced Laviticus home and called in on a George Moulton, who was a general assistant to Elizabeth Edgerton, the Grocer and Baker in Worleston. As a fellow widow, Elizabeth had allowed George to help out her friend occasionally in the past and Mary would like to see if he would look after the boys for her. She bargained with him to come and sleep on her thread bare sofa for threepence a night. He could arrive in his workwear ready for work the next morning and the boys would already be in bed asleep. This seemed like a good arrangement to him, so they made a deal.

That night when the little ones and Mary knelt to say their prayers, they all thanked God for finding Mummy a job. And so she started at Harvey's. When she got home in the morning she woke George up and sent him off to work with a silver thrupenny bit from her earnings. As the days went by, other matters added more strain on her meagre wages.

The wheel hubs on the old rickety cart were shot, the bronze bushings were so worn, that Mary had to pack the hubs each evening, with tallow and animal fats, for fear of the cartwheels collapsing on the way to work. She also had to do the same again, to get back home. The weather had turned so cold that the early morning frost bit through her fingertips, as she applied the grease.

Clothes were a worry too, she was sewing patches on top of patches on the boys pants and soon they would be too far gone to repair.

One very bleak morning, after a busy nights work, Mary readied herself for home as usual by packing the wheelhubs, when she noticed, what looked like two hub bushings in the back of the cart. New hub bushings. There was no note, no nothing, just those beautiful brand new bushings.

Who could have done this, she thought, who knew I needed them...?

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During the day Mary made a deal with Fred Dodd, a wheelwright who worked at The Smithy in the centre of Church Minshull. In exchange for him mounting the new bushings into the wheel hubs, over next couple days, she would knit him winter mitts and repair his damaged workwear. It took her a lot longer to sew his shirts than it did for him to do the hubs. The daily washing of hides had softened her usually hard and calloused hands, which was not good as it left them cracked and sore.

She was now working six nights instead of five and it still wasn't enough. Christmas was coming and she knew there would be no spare money for the stuff the boys were now asking the mythical 'Santa Claus' for before they went to bed at night. Thomas jnr, had asked for a knife, Edwin a wooden toy soldier and little George a rubber ball.

In an attempt to earn more money, Mary decided to find out as much as she could about the tanning process. She learned, that once she had finished hand-fleshing the skins, they needed bating or puering. This was a process which used dog faeces, known as 'pure', because of the cleansing and softening properties that it had on the tough leather fibres. This explained the strong stench of dog dirt ever present throughout the factory. In fact, Granny Harper actually paid the poorer men, women and children of the community, to hunt for pure in the streets of Nantwich town. If they only gathered a pailful a day, they could live very well on the money she paid, but there were days when they could do even more than that. Granny Harper was always willing to help out life's unfortunate souls and the people who were most in need.

The bater, or puerer was a very skilled operative, as the concentration of enzymes would vary from batch to batch, and over-doing the process would damage the grain of the skins. So Mary thought that after Christmas, she would talk to Granny about being trained.

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Christmas Eve arrived and Mary's boys went to bed so excited with anticipation of the arrival of Santa Claus that evening. Mary had not got the heart to try and dampen their spirits, but despite her scepticism, she still arranged for George Moulton to cut down a small holly tree on his way, so that she could decorate it with strings of popcorn and embroidered patches for tree decorations, before they awoke the next day. She was determined that there was at least something for the boys to wake up to on Christmas morning. George arrived and off she went to the Tannery, at least her fingers will be spared the sting of frost bite from packing the wheel hubs, after her night shift

When it was time for her to go home at 7 o'clock on Christmas morning, Mary hurried to the cart. She was hoping the boys wouldn't wake up before she managed to get home and get the tree dressed. It was still dark and slightly foggy, so she couldn't see much, but there appeared to be some dark shadows in the back of the cart...or was that just a trick of the fog? Something certainly looked different, but it was hard to tell what? When she reached the cart, she peered warily into the back. Then her jaw dropped at the amazing sight before her. Her old battered cart was full...full to the top with boxes of all shapes and sizes.

She quickly scrambled on top of the cart and reaching back, she pulled off the lid of the top box. Inside were pairs of boy's blue jeans, ages 7-11! She looked inside another box. It was full of shirts to go with the jeans. Then she peeked inside some of the other boxes. There was a rare treat of fruit, nuts, sweets and small handmade trinkets.

There was an enormous cured ham, four plump wood pigeons and a delicious smelling figgy pudding wrapped in a muslin. There were pins and needles for sewing and balls of wool for knitting; and there was a personal Bible decorated with ribbons and bows. Finally, one box remained and inside it were two toys...a brightly painted wooden soldier and a rubber ball,,,and one brightly shining hunting knife.

As she drove Leviticus back through the empty roads of Nantwich and up through Worleston, on the most amazing Christmas Day of her life, the morning light began to break in front of her...she started sobbing with gratitude, her tears crystallising in the crisp cold air, on her beaming cheeks.

She would never forget the joy on the faces of her little ones that precious morning.

Later on Christmas Day, she reflected on the strange things that had happened over the last few weeks. She wondered who the anonymous benefactor could be.... was it Heavenly angels who had been sent to Cheshire and were they all hanging out at Harvey's Tannery?

... or maybe those sceptical thoughts about Santa Claus were not as ridiculous as she first thought and possibly, the spirit of Christmas was alive and well and somehow she was now on his team... and maybe, just maybe, she could allow herself to believe in the magic of Santa Claus after all!