

Snow Angel Mittens

BY D. L. STRAWN

THE WINTER OF 1933. Some remember that time as the depths of the Great Depression. But I remember it for something else.

Life, as we knew it, had ground to a halt in our small town in the Blue Mountains of northeastern Oregon. When the bank failed, lots of folks found themselves penniless. Timber and farming drove our economy, and hundreds of men were idled when the sawmills shut down for lack of orders. Most stores were boarded up. Hoboes dropped off freight trains and wandered into town, searching for work or just a meal. Parents never had to mention starving kids overseas to get us to clean our plates, because kids right on our block ate things like library paste, crayons, even soap—and then got violently ill.

All around us was grim reality. Farmers couldn't sell what they raised or grew, so harvesters and plows lay rusting in farmyards. Stoic, sad-eyed cattle, shrunken for lack of feed, were driven down into big ditches and shot. Ranchers buried them, rather than watch them starve.

But life went on. It wasn't a game we could quit if we didn't like it. And we coped as best we could. When my shoes got holes, my dad just cut a piece of cardboard to slip inside them.

NO SOONER WAS Thanksgiving past that year—hardly anyone had a turkey, of course—than Christmas was upon us. The first day back at school we started practicing carols for the annual pageant. Maxine Henson, my best friend, and I were in the angelic choir—the stars, really,

LIBRARY PASTE IS THICK WHITE GLUE
MADE WITH FLOUR AND WATER.

Illustrated by Marta Antelo

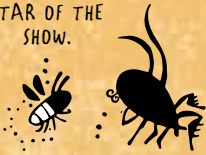


FESTIVITIES
CAN BE VERY
CHEERING IN
TOUGH TIMES.





SOMEBUGGY
THINKS SHE'S THE
STAR OF THE
SHOW.



H'MMMM!
SOUNDS LIKE
SOMEBUGGY WE
KNOW...

of the program. The little town of Bethlehem couldn't appear on stage until we sang about it. The Christ Child could not be born without us chorus-ing "Hallelujah!" And of course, who do you think visited the shepherds as they watched over their flocks? Ta-da! The Angelic Heavenly Choir, of course. The kings of the Orient—three kids in bathrobes (my brother wore Mom's silk kimono with a dragon on the back)—would have been a total flop without our song to tell the audience who they were supposed to be. We practiced and we practiced. The school gave each of us a tinsel halo and asked us to bring a white sheet from home.

Then the principal, Mr. Breitenbush, had a bright idea. We got out of almost half a day of classes when he called an assembly in the gym one morning. With a big grin he proudly announced a gift exchange among all the students in the school. We'd be Santa's little helpers, he beamed. Wouldn't it be fun?

An audible moan rose from us kids. We asked ourselves why a guy who probably wasn't going to show up anyway would need helpers. But on our way out of the gym, we each pulled a slip of paper with a name on it from a box.

"Now don't tell anyone whose name you got," Mr. Breitenbush reminded us as we shuffled away. "This will be such a surprise!"

Of course, telling us to keep the names we'd picked secret was like asking a dog to stop barking, or warning hungry kids that eating library paste will give them worms. It was an invitation, as if we needed one, to figure out every single name. And that's just exactly what Maxine and I did.

Elinor Lundgren had Maxine's name, and that was really swell. Elinor's dad owned the bank—the one that closed and took all my dad's



money with it. Mr. Lundgren still lived in his big house on the hill, and he still drove his big Cord auto around town.

Maxine had selected Fleener, a dumb boy. Why anyone would name a kid Fleener even my mom couldn't figure out.

Hildegard Ressig's name was on my slip of paper. She was a little second grader. Her folks were from Sweden or someplace like that, and she talked with a funny accent. But I'd rather have a second grader than Fleener. My mom was a genius with a needle and thread, and I knew she'd whip something up I could give.

When we figured out who had my name, I about fainted. It was Betsy McClure! Betsy was about as bad as it got. She wore black bloomers to school, long heavy stockings that bunched up around her scuffed-up shoes, and a boy's coat that buttoned left to right and was way too big. She had started school late in the year and never knew anything. Her family lived in the shacks out by the closed-down sawmill. That made her poorer than the rest of us. We didn't mean to be cruel, but it was an easy thing to climb on her to raise our own status a little higher.

My eager little heart sank with a thud. Betsy McClure was an Angel, too, but Mrs. Meakum had to bring a white sheet to school for her because her mama didn't have one. I knew I wouldn't be getting a darned thing from Betsy.

FINALLY THE DATE for the big Christmas program arrived. Maxine and I were walking home that afternoon after choir practice.

"What am I gonna do, Maxine, when my name is called? Stand up there looking stupid while everyone is watching me? That dumb Betsy

should not even have taken a name! Think she's gonna come up with a new comb, or a hair ribbon, or any gift at all?"

Maxine tried her best to make me feel better. "The poor thing," she sighed. "Well, maybe not much, but some little thing."

"Fat chance!" I exploded. "She doesn't have anything! Her family eats at the soup kitchen every day it's open! She eats library paste. You know she does! What do you mean 'poor thing'?" I had reached that point Sunday school teachers warn us about. I decided I hated Betsy McClure. I was even thinking about not going to the program to avoid the embarrassment. But in the end, the bag of goodies from Santa, with an orange, nuts, and candy, was more than I could resist.

When we reached Maxine's house, her mother, who was sweeping snow from the front porch, called to us to come see what Maxine's aunt Lola had sent in the mail. We stomped off our shoes and went indoors. A new pair of bright skates for Bud, Maxine's brother, and a red scarf with mittens to match, were out on the table.

"Oh," Maxine squealed with delight. "Look at the white snow angels, here on each end of the scarf, and on the cuffs of the mittens!" She pulled off her worn brown gloves and slipped her hand into a mitten.

"Snow angel mittens," she breathed. "Oh, Delores. Look!"

"I've never seen anything so beautiful in my whole life," I sighed. And I hadn't. Necessities were hard to come by. Anything bordering vaguely on what we might hope or wish for was like asking for the moon.

Well, I was happy for Maxine—she was my best friend—but the sight of those mittens made me feel even sorrier for myself. I didn't have a gift-happy maiden aunt in Chicago, or anyplace else for that matter.

THAT NIGHT I dragged along behind my parents, down the hill to the school. The Methodist church bells were tolling the hour of seven. A pale winter moon hovered over our town, and the snow covering roofs and yards sparkled in its light.

The same beautiful words and story—a doll swaddled up in the straw, tinsel halos, the old familiar carols, and shepherds in their dads' bathrobes (wise guys in their moms')—helped me forget about what came next.

But then, it was over, and Santa Claus came bounding down the stairs in his red suit and cap. I wanted to hide, but we grabbed at the goody

bags offered to us and sat around in chairs, waiting for Santa (Mr. Breitenbush!) to begin the gift exchange. I slid my chair back against the wall and hunkered down until my hands almost touched the floor. Maxine kept pulling me up, but I'd slide back down.

One name was called and then another. Kids jumped up, laughing happily and calling out to friends as they received their gifts. When Hildegard's name was called, I fished in my coat pocket for the little doll Mom had made. I stumbled across the room and handed it to her, then slunk back in my chair.

"Betsy McClure," Santa called. I saw Betsy stand up hesitantly. Then Maxine stood up!

I caught Maxine's arm. "You have Fleener," I reminded her.

"I traded him," she whispered as she walked over and handed her gift to Betsy.

Betsy carefully unfolded the small piece of gingham Maxine had tied about her gift. My eyes popped out, and I think I even said, "Oh no!" out loud. Maxine's red snow angel mittens lay in Betsy McClure's open palms.

Betsy turned white, I swear she did. She was numb, speechless, and tears began to fill the corners of her eyes. She murmured her thanks and sank down into her chair without raising her head again.

"Maxine!" I whispered when she sat down. I searched her eyes, and she looked back at me with that steady way she had.

"Betsy didn't have any gloves," was all she whispered back.

"Delores Kennedy," Santa called out. My turn had come. I knew it would. But I didn't



budge until Maxine nudged me. I looked across to see Betsy on her feet, coming toward me. I eased up from my chair.

Betsy handed me a small brown paper sack. “Merry Christmas,” she said.

I looked at her standing there and seemed to see her for the first time. Her delicate face, framed by wavy, wheat-colored hair, was smiling at me and searching my eyes for a hint of friendly acceptance.

“I . . . I . . . thank you,” I muttered awkwardly, and opened the sack. I looked in, then back at her, and slid out Maxine’s red snow angel mittens and another small item. It was a star made of twigs, bound with reed grass. It must have taken hours to make. I suddenly felt very small.


“But Betsy . . .,” I started to say. The glow on her face stopped me. It occurred to me that I’d never seen her smile in all the weeks she’d been among us.

As Betsy marched back to her chair, I sank down next to Maxine again. She was laughing at me. “You looked so befuddled, Delores! Wasn’t that sweet of Betsy?”

I tried three times to give those mittens back to Maxine. I even told her I didn’t really like them. She just laughed at me again.

Across the room Betsy was still aglow, after giving me the finest thing she had ever owned. I thought, Betsy

McClure, you little angel in black bloomers, you. You’re the one who showed me what real charity looks like. How on earth does your small, scrawny body hold a heart so big? I’d like to know.

I felt kind of funny about it, but I actually ended up with those mittens. Imagine that! I loved them to pieces and wore them to nubbins. 

THAT ONE GIFT
MADE SEVERAL
PEOPLE HAPPY!



EVEN THE
ONES WHO
GAVE IT
AWAY



THEY’RE
VERY CUTE
MITTENS.
NOT LUMPY
AT ALL.

