

# A Gift for Little Jesus

## A Memorable True Story of A Modern Christmas Miracle

By Andrew Peeples

A little stranger in my native town of Bluffton, South Carolina, came into my life Christmas Eve under circumstances most embarrassing to me. I can only believe that an angel—one of the guardian angels that watch over little children—planned it that way for a very special purpose. How else can I explain the strange events which began in the late afternoon of that memorable day?

For instance, who but an angel urged me to get ready for our Sunday school Christmas Tree a whole hour before the church bell rang, and then hurried me off while the sun was still bright enough for me to see that shiny quarter half buried outside my front gate?

Who but an angel made me run to the store and exchange my sudden wealth for that brand new mouth organ in a bright red box, and then prompted my father to heave a sigh and say, “Please son, go down to the river and learn to play a tune.”

And who but an angel led me into the chilly dampness underneath the deserted steamboat wharf, and then sent that little stranger to the flowing well on the beach, in easy earshot of my practicing place?

Anyway, there I was with my brand new mouth organ, seated and shivering on a drift of dead marsh grass, practicing a plaintive little melody, a sort of wail or dirge, called *Reuben*. It was the top tune in Bluffton. Any mouth organist in the town could close his eyes and breathe sadly into a few minor keys and render “Reuben.”

But my musical talent was limited. No matter how sadly I breathed, or into which combination of keys I breathed, the succession of sounds that came out of my beautiful little instrument of tin and wood was as unrelated to a dirge as the clanging of cow bells to a lullaby.

Had I not believed that practice makes perfect, those harsh discords would have discouraged me. Instead, they inspired me to even greater effort. And I was breathing in and out just as hard as I could when suddenly, from behind the nearest

barnacle-covered piling, a pair of big black eyes began staring at me, and the mouth organ fell out of my cupped hands.

I was so embarrassed that I fumbled the little instrument in my lap before I could get it in the bright red box and conceal it deep down in my side coat pocket. Then I began skipping oyster shells across the water, hoping those big black eyes would go away as silently as they had come.

But instead of going away, they moved out from behind the piling, bringing with them the rest of an oddly dressed little boy just about my age. The red woolen stocking on his head was pulled down over his ears and his grayish sweater reached almost to the tops of his enormous black rubber boots. He stood there looking at me with a grin on his face that reminded me of a stray puppy that wanted to be friendly.

I skipped another shell. I was in no mood for friendliness with a stranger who had sneaked up on me and shamed me half to death. I wanted him to go away and leave me alone.

“My name is Jesus,” he said and I almost fainted before he added, “Antonio Fernandez.” I recognized the accent of the Portuguese fishermen who sometimes sailed their boats up the river to Bluffton.

He pointed to a small cabin sailboat anchored in the shallow water near the flowing well. “That my papa boat,” he said “I come ashore with the water jug and I hear the music.”

I felt like saying, “Fill your jug and leave me alone.” But I skipped another shell and continued avoiding those big eyes. I thought that if I ignored him, he’d go away sooner. But he didn’t. He kept on talking.

“My papa teach me the harmonica. Then I drop the harmonica over board. Now it is Christmas already and we have no music on boat.”

“Buy another one,” I said. It slipped out before I thought. “Sure we buy another, when we find fish,” he said. “Maybe tomorrow. Maybe next day.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Maybe

next week. But now is the time for the Christmas music, like the *Jingle Bells*.”

Right then the church bells began to ring. “Gee whiz,” I cried, jumping to my feet, “I forgot about the Christmas tree! I got to go!” I was glad for the excuse to get away from that talkative little intruder.

The church was filled when I got there. I had to wedge myself between two other boys on a front bench. Everybody was excited, waiting for Santa Claus to appear from his hiding place back of the big candle-lighted tree in front of the pulpit. In a few minutes the organ was playing and everyone was singing, “Silent night, Holy night,” and then there was a prayer, and then the bible story about little Jesus in the manger and the shepherds and all that, and then-well, I thought they would never get to the tree.

Finally, Santa Claus came out of hiding and then there was so much commotion on the benches that he had to hold up both hands for quiet. Then he talked a little while about the spirit of Christmas. He even quoted one of the bible verses I had learned in my Sunday school class, the one about how being more blessed to give than to receive.

I thought that was a strange verse to quote at a Christmas tree. We came to a Christmas tree to get, not give! At least I did. Ever since I had entered the church, I had been trying to spot my package on the tree and figure out what was in it. I had a feeling it was a pocket knife, or maybe a new fountain pen.

Just as soon as Santa Claus finished his little talk, my Sunday school teacher and another lady went up to the tree and began taking the gifts off the tree and handing them to Santa. He would bring each one to the chancel rail and read aloud the name on it. Then a boy or a girl would run up and receive it from Santa Claus. I sat poised on the edge of my seat, ready to jump the three or four feet to the rail the second my name was called. Several times I almost slipped off the bench!

By the time the tree was stripped down to the last two gifts, my heart was running wild. One of them had to be mine. I couldn't sit any longer. I had to stand up and put one foot forward. The first of the last two gifts was for a little girl. Knowing that the next one had to be mine, I

sprang up to the rail and waited for Santa to return with it from the tree. But when he came, he didn't read the name on the package, he just stood there looking over my head at something to the rear of the church. Then he leaned down and whispered in my ear. “There's a little stranger in the vestibule, do you know his name?” I looked quickly at the little stranger. He had taken the red stocking off his head and was holding it in his hand. But I recognized the grayish sweater and the enormous black rubber boots. “His name is Jesus Antonio Fernandez, he lives on a boat,” I said.

Santa looked at the name on the gift he was holding in his hand, “This is for you,” he said to me. “It's the last gift on the tree. Would you be willing to have your name rubbed out and the name of little Jesus put on it?” For a moment I hated the little stranger. Wasn't it enough that he had embarrassed me underneath the wharf? Why did he have to follow me to the church and take my gift, even before I could see what it was? I wanted to yell “NO, NO! It's my gift and I want it for myself!”

In anger I thrust my hands into my coat pockets. In one of them I touched the bright red box I had concealed there. And then something—I know it was the angel—made my hand grasp it and pull it out and hand it to Santa and say, “This is what he wants, he can have it instead.”

“God bless you,” Santa said. “Now go and bring him up here while I get his gift wrapped and his name on it.”

Hand in hand we came up to the chancel rail, and side by side we stood there. Santa Claus read out my name first. Then, chuckling merrily, he said, “Well, well, well. We've come to the very last gift on the tree, and it's—let's see—it's for our very special guest, little Jesus Antonio Fernandez!”

We tore wrappers off of our gifts as we hurried out into the street. Little Jesus looked at mine and I looked at his, and we laughed until we almost cried. Then we both began playing our beautiful brand new mouth organs just as hard as we could. Little Jesus was playing *Jingle Bells*, and I was once again attempting *Rueben*.

I can only believe that it was planned that way by an angel—one of the guardian angels who watches over little children. The End.