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CLARA'S FIRST CHRISTMAS

by Ann Harris

MAPLEGROVE
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CHAPTER 1

“I see buildings ahead,” shouted Clara looking out of the front of the covered wagon. “At last we have arrived!” Leaning forward, she wrapped her arms around her mam’s shoulders and kissed her cheek.

Without saying anything, her mam slapped the lines sharply along the back of their weary horse, Sam, urging him forward. It had been a gruelling few weeks overland, and the family was exhausted and discouraged at what was supposed to be a fresh beginning in a new country. But the sight of the village of Maplegrove lifted their spirits a little and Clara was excited as she thought of finally seeing their new home.

Charlie looked around in awe as they passed the tall, wooden grist mill on the river bank. “Look at that,” he said as he watched the large water wheel slowly turning, providing the power to operate the machinery. On the other side of the

river, he could see a saw mill and hear voices of the men who were busy sawing huge logs into planks.

"Whoa," Clara's mam called to Sam, as she pulled on the lines.

"Where is our house, Mam?" Peg, the youngest, asked as she stood up on the seat next to her mam.

"I don't know. We will have to ask someone." Making a clucking sound with her tongue, she flicked the long whip gently over Sam's back and the wagon lurched forward.

"Morning ma'am," said a tall, lean man as he took off his hat. "Haven't seen you around here before. Are you lost?"

"I don't think so. This is Maplegrove, isn't it?"

"It is so," he replied. "Will you be settling here in the community?"

She nodded and asked, "Can you tell me where I can find Mr. Palmer? We met him in London and have travelled across the ocean to live in one of his houses."

The man frowned. "Mr. Palmer, you say?" He scratched his head. "Do you mean Mr. *Evan* Palmer ma'am?"

"Yes that's right. Where is his house?"

"Well now, Mr. Palmer doesn't live in Maplegrove anymore."

"But that can't be," she answered indignantly. "We signed some papers this past January when he was in England, and paid him a sum of money to purchase a plot of land and a house. You must be thinking of someone else. The Mr. Palmer we met had a nice wife, Daisy, with him. A very nice lady she was."

"Daisy, did you say?"

She nodded.

"Well ma'am, I am sorry to tell you but Daisy Palmer died back in the spring of this year and Mr. Palmer left Maplegrove in the summer to return to England."

Clara gasped and clutched her mam's hand. "What are we going to do, Mam? We can't go on. We're all exhausted."

"Quiet, girl!" her mam said as she turned to the man. "Do you know where Mr. Palmer had his home? Maybe we can go there and stay until I can find out what to do."

He shook his head. "That won't be possible ma'am; somebody already bought the house and lives there. Perhaps you should ask at the township office on the main street, they will have a list of all the rightful owners of any property in Maplegrove."

"Thank you, sir. Then we will go there."

He smiled as he put his hat back on. "That's a nice horse you have ma'am. Figuring on selling him? After all, it is November, and unless you have a cutter, that wagon will be useless in the snow and ice."

"I hadn't given it much thought. Why do you ask?"

"Well now, I might be interested, at a good price mind, to take him and the wagon off your hands."

"I'll let you know, but for now we must find our home. Good day, sir."

"We need the money, Mam. Maybe you should sell Sam. We won't need him or the wagon once we get settled," said Clara.

"Hush girl, one thing at a time."

At the township office they finally found out where their land was situated. Outside, on the steps, the clerk pointed along the road. "Go down here to the fork in the road. Then turn left, past the shingles mill, then up the hill past the print shop. Carry on through the woods and down into the valley. You'll find your cabin and small holding just past some burned out log cabins. Good luck."

Clara's First Christmas

As they bounced over the deep ruts along the wooded pathway, Clara and her brothers and sisters clung to the sides of the wagon. Their eyes were wide with anticipation at the prospect of finally having their own home. Entering a small clearing in the bush, they drove by a couple of charred cabins. Their mam pulled Sam to a stop in front of a tiny log cabin. She lowered her head onto her chest and put her hand on her forehead. Everyone sat in silence, looking at what they were afraid was about to be their new home.

"Is this it?" shouted Jack in disgust. "Is this what we have come hundreds of miles to live in?"

"Quiet, Jack," Charlie chastised his younger brother, "Its home, our first real home. Be thankful."

Rosie and her mam just sat and stared, too exhausted to move and too shocked at what they were looking at.

Clara touched her mam's arm "Come on, Mam, let's go inside and you can rest. Rosie and I can bring our things out of the wagon and the boys can unhitch Sam and tie him in those trees." She looked at Charlie and pointed to a small stand of pine trees behind him.

A little while later, having got over the initial shock of the size of the small one-roomed cabin, Clara took charge and directed Charlie, Jack and Rosie to start tidying up the cabin.

"I'll take these and find out where to get some water," she said, picking up two wooden buckets. "You can come with me, Peg."

"Where's the pump?" asked Peg.

Looking around, Clara shrugged her shoulders. "I don't see one. Let's look behind the cabin and see what's there." Not seeing a well or pump anywhere, she said to Peg, "I guess we had better get some water from the river then. Come on. I think it must be this way."

They followed a path that led to the river. Clara stopped at the top of a steep slope, and stared down at the fast moving water bubbling over large rocks. "There must be another way down. This is too steep. Wait here, Peg, and I'll walk along the bank and see." Picking up the buckets she walked along the bank until she found a place where the slope wasn't so steep. At the water's edge she bent down to fill a bucket.

A scream echoed through the trees. "Clara, Clara! Help me!"

Clara set the half-filled bucket on the bank and hurriedly climbed up onto the well trodden path. "Peg, where are you?"

Her heart beating fast, Clara raced back along the river bank, looking left and right as she ran back to where she had left Peg. "Where are you, Peg?"

"Clara! Over here! Help me, its cold!"

She saw her tiny sister bobbing in the water; her arms splashing as she tried to grab an overhanging branch. "Help me, I can't swim!"

Without another thought, Clara slithered down the bank and into the cold water. "Hang on Peg, I'm coming."

"Hurry, Clara, I'm tired," gasped Peg as she spluttered and coughed.

Clara waded out into the rushing water, ignoring the coldness seeping through her thin skirt. As she got closer to Peg, the little girl went under the water.

"Peg!" screamed Clara as she plunged and splashed her way to where Peg had just disappeared. Desperately, she grabbed hold of Peg and lifted her until her head was above the water. She dragged her to the bank and scrambled up the slope, pulling her shivering and frightened sister with her. Tears of relief rolled down Clara's face as she hugged Peg tightly. "Oh Peg, I'm so glad you're alright. You scared me

half to death, so you did. We must hurry and get you home. Take my hand and let's run. It will help to keep us warm."

Bursting through the door the two girls stood in the doorway shivering, with water dripping off their clothes. Clara's mam gasped at the sight of them and at the puddle spreading over the floor. "Mercy me, what happened?" she asked as she looked from one to the other. "Why are you soaking wet?"

"I fell in the river," Peg answered as fresh tears flowed down her face. "And ..." she sniffed, "... and Clara had to jump in and save me!"

Staring at Clara, her mam shook her finger at her. "Why didn't you watch what your sister was doing? She could have drowned!"

Upset by this accusation, Clara looked away from the penetrating stare. "I'm sorry, Mam. I went looking for a better place to get the water and I left Peg high on the bank."

"You *left* her? Have you no sense, girl?"

"How was I to know she would get so close to the water?" Clara shouted, angry at the way her mam was scolding her.

"You should have taken her with you," her mam retorted.

"I didn't think ..."

"That's the trouble, girl. You *never* think. And now look where it has got you." Turning, she said, "Charlie, go and look for some firewood and light a fire to warm Peg up."

"Yes, Mam. Where do I light it?" he asked, looking around.

"In the fire pit, boy!" she snapped, pointing to the small sand pit at the end of the room. "You are about as senseless as your sister! Now hurry up."

Clara felt sorry for Charlie. She knew that her mam was exhausted and stressed from all that had happened, but she didn't need to shout at them, and particularly Charlie who hadn't done anything wrong. She smiled at him as he brushed past her. "It's alright, Charlie. She didn't mean it," she whispered.

Charlie found some small pieces of wood and lit the fire while his mam, still grumbling, stripped the wet clothes from Peg and bundled her in the old, patchwork quilt from the bed. "Come and sit by the fire. You'll soon warm up." Holding Peg's hands between her own, she rubbed hard to warm them while she muttered to herself.

Clara changed out of her own wet clothes and said, "I'll go back to the river and fill the water buckets."

"That would be a good idea," answered her mam in a harsh voice as she stared into the fire.

The next day, Clara kept an eye on Peg, hoping that she wouldn't catch a cold from her ordeal in the river. She herself was feeling shivery and had a headache. But she was in enough trouble with her mam as it was and didn't want to complain.

"Don't fall in the water, Clara," Peg called out as Clara prepared to leave the cabin.

"I won't, Peg, don't you worry. You just stay warm."