



## The Christmas Candle

By Max Lucado

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Imagine a Victorian England village in the Cotswolds where very little out of the ordinary ever happens . . . except at Christmas time.

This year, Edward Haddington, a lowly candle maker, is visited by a mysterious angel. That angel silently imparts a precious gift—a gift that's bungled and subsequently lost. The candle maker and his wife, Bea, struggle to find the gift.

And when they do, they have to make a difficult choice. Who among their community is most in need of a Christmas miracle?

Join inspirational author Max Lucado and experience anew the joy of Christmas.

BONUS: Includes a sneak preview of Max's novel, *Miracle at the Higher Grounds Café*!

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### Editorial Review

#### About the Author

More than 100 million readers have found comfort in the writings of **Max Lucado**. He ministers at the Oak Hills Church in San Antonio, Texas, where he lives with his wife, Denalyn, and a sweet but misbehaving mutt, Andy.

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### Chapter One

*Afternoon*

*May 4, 1864*

"I just think it odd that Oxford would assign its top student to a village like Gladstone," Edward Haddington said to his wife, Bea. A broad-shouldered man with a brilliant set of dark eyes and full, gray eyebrows, he wrestled to button the waistcoat over his rotund belly.

Equally plump Bea was having troubles of her own. "How long since I wore this dress?" she wondered aloud. "Must I let it out again?" Then louder, "Edward, hurry. He's due within the hour."

"Don't you think it odd?"

"I don't know what to think, dear. But I know we need to leave now if we don't want to be late. He arrives at half-past one."

The couple hurried out of the small gabled house and scurried the half mile south on Bristol Lane toward the center of the village. They weren't alone. A dozen or more villagers walked ahead of them. By the time Edward and Bea reached the town commons, at least half the citizens of Gladstone, some sixty people, stood staring northward. No one noticed the white-haired couple. All eyes were on the inbound wagon.

The driver pulled the horses to a halt, and a young man stood to exit. He bore beady eyes, a pointed chin, and his angular nose seemed to descend forever before finding a place to stop. With a tall hat in his hand and a black coat draped on his shoulders, Rev. David Richmond surveyed the crowd. Edward detected a sigh. "We must appear odd to him," he whispered to Bea.

She cupped an ear toward him. "What?"

He shook his head, not wanting to risk being overheard.

A goggle-eyed locksmith, so humped from filing he had to greet the guest with a sideways, upward glance, extended the first hello. Next came a short farmer and his Herculean, simpleminded son. "He can clean the windows in the church," the father offered. "He did for Reverend Pillington." A mill worker asked Reverend Richmond if he liked to fish. Before he could reply, a laborer invited the minister to join him and his friends at the pub.

"Let the man breathe, dear people. Let him breathe." The citizens parted to let Edward extend his hand. "A fine welcome to Gladstone, Reverend. Did you enjoy the carriage ride?"

Reverend Richmond had ample reason to say yes. Spring had decked the Cotswolds in her finest fashions. Waist-high stone walls framed the fields. Puffy flocks dotted the pastures. Crows scavenged seeds from melting snow. May clouds passed and parted, permitting sunlight to glint off the shallow creeks. England at her best. Yet the minister replied with an unconvincing, "It was pleasant."

Edward picked up the clergyman's bag and led him through the crowd. "We'll deposit your things at the parsonage and let you freshen up. Then I'll leave you with the Barstow family for tea."

As the crowd dispersed, the reverend nodded and followed his hosts toward the manse. It sat in the shadow of St. Mark's Church, which was only a stone's throw from the center of town. The hoary, dog-toothed Norman tower stood guard over the village. Edward paused in front of the church gate and invited, "Would you like to take a look inside?"

The guest nodded, and the three entered the grounds.

A cemetery separated the church from the road. "To preach to the living, you have to pass through the dead," Edward quipped.

"Edward!" Bea corrected.

Reverend Richmond offered no reply.

The walls of the path through the cemetery were, at points, shoulder high, elevating the headstones to eye level. The newest one lay beneath the tallest yew tree near the church entrance and marked the burial place of St. Mark's former rector. Edward and Bea paused, giving Richmond time to read the inscription:

*Reverend P. Pillington  
Man of God.  
Man of Faith.  
Man of Gladstone.  
Ours, but for a moment.  
God's forever.  
1789-1864*

"This month we'd have celebrated his fiftieth year at the church," said Bea.

"When did he die?" the reverend asked.

"February," Edward answered. "Hard winter. Pneumonia took him."

"God took him," Bea altered.

Edward nodded. "We dearly loved the man. You'll find his fingerprints throughout the valley. He taught us to trust, to pray. He even taught me to read and write."

Bea chimed in. "Edward here was a diligent student. Come ahead. Let's step inside."

The heavy doors opened to the rear of the sanctuary. Three shafts of stained-glass sunlight spilled through tall windows. "My grandfather helped install those," Edward offered. He strode the five short steps to the baptismal font and motioned for the reverend to join him. "Dates back two centuries," Edward said, running a finger along the limestone. "My ancestors were all baptized here. In fact, my great-great--Bea, how many 'greats' is it?"

She placed a finger to her lips. "Let the reverend meditate."

Edward apologized with a wave and stepped back.

One aisle separated two groups of ten pews. A lectern faced the seats on the left, and a pulpit presided over the church from the right. Brass organ pipes climbed the chancel wall behind the pulpit, where two sets of choir benches faced each other.

"My Bea plays the organ," Edward boasted.

The clergyman didn't respond. He made the short walk to the front and stopped at the first of the five swaybacked stone steps leading up to the pulpit. A thick Bible and empty glass rested on the stand.

"Been vacant since February," Edward offered.

Reverend Richmond turned with a puzzled look. "No minister filled in?"

Bea shook her head. "Only on occasion. Gladstone is too remote for most clergymen. But we've gotten by."

"Right," Reverend Richmond said, suddenly ready to leave. "Shall we move on?"

Bea extended a hand. "I'll go home and prepare some dinner. Reverend, enjoy your visit to Gladstone."

Edward showed the minister the parsonage and waited outside until he was ready for the first appointment of the afternoon.

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Charles Barstow cut an imposing figure standing in his doorway: thick shoulders, long face, hollow cheeks flanked by snow-white sideburns, and eyebrows as thick as hedges.

As Edward presented the reverend, he explained, "Charles runs the local mercantile. Need boots, hats, or hammers? He can help you."

Richmond noted the fine house: ivy framed its dormers; jasmine and roses charmed the porch.

"Charles, I'll leave him in your care," Edward said.

"Fine."

Mr. Barstow's wife joined him at the door and escorted them to a table in the inglenook next to the fireplace. She stood much shorter than the two men, her head level with her husband's shoulders. She was overdressed, better attired for the theatre than for tea. She attempted a sophisticated air, as if wanting to be in, or at least from, some other town. "Tell me," she nasaled, pausing after each word. "How is life in Oxford?"

Her husband sighed and motioned for the minister to sit. "I understand you grew up in London."

"I did."

"My family is from Putney--some time back, however. And yours?"

"Kensington. I'm the first to leave the city, actually. That is, if I do. I shall be the first in our family not to

serve the royal household in generations."

"Oh." Mrs. Barstow perked up. "What is your connection?"

"My father is a barrister."

"My, my," Mrs. Barstow admired.

The Barstows' granddaughter, Emily, joined them at the table.

Reverend Richmond was grateful to see someone closer to his age, even more thankful to see someone so pretty. Emily's curled brown locks fell to her shoulders. Her warm hazel eyes ducked from his glance. He looked away, equally embarrassed.

"I hear you have no wife," her grandmother said.

Emily blushed. The reverend caught the hint but didn't reply.

Mr. Barstow redirected the conversation with questions about Oxford, but his wife was not easily deterred. At the next pause, she jumped in. "Our dear friend's niece will marry next week. As for us, we have no plans."

Emily, who still hadn't spoken, shot a glance at her grandmother.

"That's good to know," Reverend Richmond offered, then corrected himself. "I mean, it's nice that your friend is marrying, and, well, I hope you will . . . or your granddaughter will marry soon as well. If she wants to, that is."

"Tell me, Reverend." Charles spoke, to the minister's relief. "What do you think of the candle?"

"The candle?"

"The Gladstone Candle."

"I, uh, can't say I've heard of it."

The three Barstows shared wide-eyed glances.

"You've never heard of the candle?" Mrs. Barstow asked.

"Or the candle maker?" Mr. Barstow added.

"Or the Christmas miracles?" Emily completed.

"No," the reverend admitted, feeling that he'd missed a long conversation.

The three looked at him with eyes reserved for a sumptuous meal, each wanting to eat first. "Well, let me tell you--" Mrs. Barstow volunteered.

"Maybe I should do that," her husband interrupted. But a knock at the door stopped him. He stood and answered it.

"I knew if I didn't come, you'd forget to bring him to our house," said a friendly, round-faced woman.

Mr. Barstow turned toward the minister. "This is Sarah Chumley. She'll take you to your next visit."

Reverend Richmond gave her a puzzled look. Sarah chuckled. "You've apparently met my twin, Bea Haddington. Don't even try to tell us apart. People who have known us for years still grow confused."

Richmond stood, thanked his guests. Mrs. Barstow spoke again. "I'll be glad to finish what we started, Reverend."

*Did she mean the candle or the courting?* He didn't know and didn't dare ask. He turned and smiled a half smile, grateful to be leaving.

Sarah Chumley was as cheerful as the morning sun...

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