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A Christmas Day in the Morning Pearl S. Buck Pre-class Work I

Read the text once for the main idea. Do not refer to the notes, dictionaries or the glossary yet. He woke suddenly and completely. It was four o'clock, the hour at which his father had always called him to get up and help with the milking. Strange how the habits of his youth clung to him still! His father had been dead for thirty years, and yet he still woke at four o'clock in the morning. But this morning, because it was Christmas, he did not try to sleep again. Yet what was the magic of Christmas now? His childhood and youth were long past, and his own children had grown up and gone. Yesterday his wife had said, "It isn't worthwhile, perhaps." And he had said, "Yes, Alice, even if there are only the two of us, let's have a Christmas of our own." Then she had said, "Let's not trim the tree until tomorrow, Robert. I'm tired." He had agreed, and the tree was still out by the back door. He lay in his bed in his room. Why did he feel so awake tonight? For it was still night, a clear and starry night. No moon, of course, but the stars were extraordinary! Now that he thought of it, the stars seemed always large and clear before the dawn of Christmas Day. He slipped back in time, as he did so easily nowadays. He was fifteen years old and still on his father's farm. He loved his father. He had not known it until one day a few days before Christmas, when he had overheard what his father was saying to his mother. "Mary, I hate

to call Rob in the mornings. Hes growing so fast, and he needs his sleep. I wish I could manage alone." "Well, you cant, Adam." His mothers voice was brisk, "Besides, he isnt a child any more. Its time he took his turn." "Yes," his father said slowly, "But I sure do hate to wake him." When he heard these words, something in him woke: his father loved him! He had never thought of it before, taking for granted the tie of their blood. Now that he knew his father loved him, there would be no more loitering in the mornings and having to be called again. He got up, stumbling blind with sleep, and pulled on his clothes. And then on the night before Christmas, he lay thinking about the next day. They were poor, and most of the excitement was in the turkey they had raised themselves and in the mince pies his mother made. His sisters sewed presents, and his mother and father always bought something he needed, a warm jacket, maybe, or a book. And he always saved and bought them each something, too. He wished, that Christmas he was fifteen, he had a better present for his father instead of the usual tie from the ten-cent store. He lay on his side and looked out of his attic window. "Dad," he had once asked when he was a little boy, "What is a stable?" "Its just a barn," his father had replied, "like ours." Then Jesus had been born in a barn, and to a barn the shepherds and the Wise Men had come, bringing their Christmas gifts! A thought struck him like a silver dagger. Why should he not give his father a special gift, out there in the barn? He could get up earlier, creep into the barn and get all the milking done. And then when his father went in to start the milking, hed see it all done. He laughed to himself as he gazed at the stars. It was what he

would do, and he mustnt sleep too soundly. He must have waked twenty times, striking a match each time to look at his old watch. At a quarter to three, he got up and crept downstairs, careful of the creaky boards, and let himself out. A big star hung low over the roof, a reddish gold. The cows looked at him, sleepy and surprised. It was early for them, too. But they accepted him calmly and he brought some hay for each cow and then got the milking pail and the big milk cans. He had never milked all alone before, but it seemed almost easy. He smiled and milked steadily, two strong streams rushing into the pail, frothing and fragrant. The cows were behaving well, as though they knew it was Christmas. The task went more easily than he had ever known it to before. Milking for once was not a chore. It was a gift to his father. He finished, the two milk cans were full, and he covered them and closed the milk-house door carefully, making sure of the latch. He put the stool in its place by the door and hung up the clean milk pail. Then he went out of the barn and barred the door behind him. Back in his room he had only a minute to pull off his clothes and jump into bed, before he heard his father get up. He put the covers over his head to silence his quick breathing. The door opened. "Rob! " his father called. "We have to get up, son, even if it is Christmas." "Aw-right," he said sleepily. "Ill go on out," his father said. "Ill get things started." The door closed and he lay still, laughing to himself. In just a few minutes his father would know. His dancing heart was ready to jump from his body. The minutes were endless, fifteen, he did not know how many and he heard his fathers footsteps again. The door opened. "Rob!" "Yes, Dad" "You son of a" His father

was laughing, a queer sobbing sort of a laugh. "Thought you'd fool me, did you?" His father was standing beside his bed, feeling for him, pulling away the cover. He found his father and clutched him in a great hug. He felt his father's arms go around him. It was dark, and they could not see each other's faces. "Son, I thank you. Nobody ever did a nicer thing" "It's for Christmas, Dad!" He did not know what to say. His heart was bursting with love. "Well. I guess I can go back to sleep," his father said after a moment. "No, come to think of it, son, I've never seen you children when you first saw the Christmas tree. I was always in the barn. Come on!" He pulled on his clothes again, and they went down to the Christmas tree, and soon the sun was creeping up to where the star had been. Oh, what a Christmas morning, and how his heart had nearly burst again with shyness and pride as his father told his mother about how he, Rob, had got up all by himself. "The best Christmas gift I ever had, and I'll remember it, son, every year on Christmas morning, as long as I live." They had both remembered it, and now that his father was dead he remembered it alone: that blessed Christmas dawn when, along with the cows in the barn, he had made his first gift of true love. Outside the window now the stars slowly faded. He got out of bed and put on his slippers and bathrobe and went softly downstairs. He brought in the tree, and carefully began to trim it. It was done very soon. He then went to his library and brought the little box that contained his special gift to his wife, a diamond brooch, not large, but beautiful in design. But he was not satisfied. He wanted to tell her how much he loved her. How fortunate that he had been able to love! Ah,

that was the true joy of life, the ability to love! For he was quite sure that some people were genuinely unable to love anyone. But love was alive in him. it still was. It occurred to him suddenly that it was alive because long ago it had been born in him when he knew his father loved him. That was it: love alone could waken love. And this morning, this blessed Christmas morning, he would give it to his beloved wife. He could write it down in a letter for her to read and keep forever. He went to his desk and began: My dearest love. When it was finished, he sealed it and tied it on the tree. He put out the light and went tiptoeing up the stairs. The stars in the sky were gone, and the first rays of the sun were gleaming in the east, such a happy, happy Christmas!

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