

# A Franklin Manor Christmas



PAUL WILLCOTT

**FROM THE OUTSET**, former professor Butch Regent knew it was more than just a cavernous Victorian house in the mountains. After all, for the past half century it had been a nunnery. Before that, a tuberculosis sanatorium.

It was falling down, but fixing it up and giving it yet another worthy incarnation would bring meaning to his restless life.

The star-in-the-east promise of the start turns destructive when Regent goes broke. Never mind renovation—he can't even afford to repair the broken plumbing. He can barely keep up with the mortgage payments.

But Franklin Manor is a special place. Even as it seems about to destroy Regent, it reaches out through the good offices of resident angels and long-dead former residents to bring him from the edge of despair to new hope.

*A Franklin Manor Christmas* was first published online in 2004 by North Country Public Radio in Canton, New York. In 2007, NCPR broadcast a radio-play adaptation performed by Pendragon Theatre of Saranac Lake, New York. These and other work by Paul Willcott can be heard or read at [www.ncpr.org](http://www.ncpr.org).

# A Franklin Manor Christmas

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BY PAUL WILLCOTT  
WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY Walle Conoly



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So much of mankind's varied experience had passed there—so much had been suffered, and something too, enjoyed—that the very timbers were oozy, as with the moisture of a heart. It was itself like a great human heart, with a life of its own, and full of rich and somber reminiscences.

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE, *The House of the Seven Gables*



CHAPTER ONE

*Beatrice Karen Susan Cooper*

As Professor Butch Regent worked his way slowly up the hill toward the decaying hulk that was his home, the swirling snow and below-zero cold caused him to look down at his feet and hunch his shoulders even more than usual. It made him look older than his 65 years.

He heard the child before he saw her. The hacking cough and grown-up hawk and spit cut right through the whistling and whirring of the icy wind. He straightened his long body and looked for the sound. He found it leaning with one hand against a utility pole at the edge of the street. Not that the edge of the street was visible. Snow had been falling for days, threatening to shut down even Oliver's Mountain, a village that knew everything there was to know about winter excesses.

The child hacked and hawked and spit some more. It

showed red in the strobe effect of the streetlight on swirling snow.

When she'd caught her breath, she raised her face and gazed fixedly at the worn-looking man, calmly taking his measure.

"Hello," she said after a bit.

"Hello."

Not being much of a conversationalist unless he was in the thrall of one of his periodic passions—most certainly not the situation at present—and besides that, having had little experience with children, the professor couldn't think of anything to say next.

Finally, he tried, "What's your name?"

"Beatrice Karen Susan Cooper," the child replied.

The professor, being caught up in his own affairs, failed to notice the child's shivering or even to pay much attention to her racking cough. He did remark her name.

"That's quite a long name."

"Yes," she agreed matter-of-factly.

She was taken by another fit of coughing and spit more bloody mess into the snow.

Self-absorbed though he was, the old man was no longer able not to notice.

"That's a nasty cough. I don't think you should be out here in this weather in your condition. Where do you...?"

The child smiled at him in a way that stopped him from finishing his question.

"Don't worry, Professor Regent. Don't worry."

She knew his name. She must live nearby.

“Your coat doesn’t look very warm.”

“Thank you for your concern, Professor, but it doesn’t matter.”

*What an odd thing to say*, he thought. *It doesn’t matter. So resigned. So stoical. So old.* The professor wrapped his own coat more tightly about his long, skinny body and adjusted his scarf and fur cap.

“May I ask you, Beatrice Karen Susan Cooper, how old you are, or doesn’t that matter either?”

“I’m seven, but you’re right, that doesn’t matter either.”

Pulling his scarf still farther up on his face, he thought, *Just when I when I thought I had met every single impossible person there could be in this village, another one pops up in a 20-below blizzard. And only seven years old.*

He continued doggedly, “Uh, do you live close by Bea...”

She interrupted. “Just call me Susan.”

Regent didn’t like being told what to do. Not even a little bit. That (and a tendency to leap impulsively into impossible-dream scenarios) pretty well defined him. But for some reason, the little girl’s instruction didn’t bother him much.

“OK,” he said.

The child looked up at him after another fit of coughing, one so fierce that her cap came loose and almost blew away. It was quite an old-fashioned cap. For that matter, everything she had on was reminiscent of clothes his sister had worn when she was about Susan’s age back during



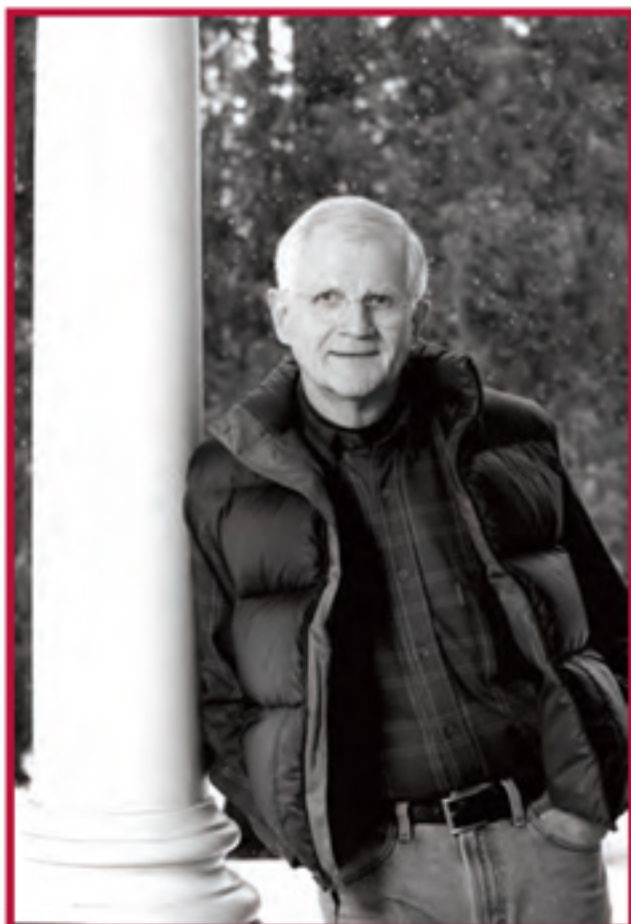


PHOTO BY NANCIE BATTAGLIA

Paul Willcott is a lapsed Texan with a Ph.D. in foreign language education and a law degree. He has lived in Baghdad, Tehran, Amman, London, Hong Kong, Zurich, Washington, D.C., and elsewhere. He now divides his time between Manhattan and the village of Saranac Lake in the Adirondack Mountains.

VISIT: [www.paulwillcott.com](http://www.paulwillcott.com)

ILLUSTRATIONS BY Walle Conoly  
DESIGN BY Karen Davidson



**NUNNERY FOR SALE**  
Former tuberculosis sanatorium. 50 rooms.

For most potential buyers, Franklin Manor was just a run-down old house, half-buried in Adirondack snow. But to erstwhile professor Butch Regent, Franklin Manor was a beacon of hope. He would buy it, renovate it, and turn it into an artists' retreat.

Franklin Manor would make his gray and unsatisfactory life bright and meaningful. But not without a life-and-death struggle.

Nuns and tuberculosis patients and other former residents make a Christmas return from the dead to save the house and the old man from destruction.

**IT'S A TWO-HANKIE, DEEP-SNOW  
CHRISTMAS STORY OF DESPAIR VERSUS HOPE.**

*A totally shameless tearjerker, a gem of the Christmas genre.*

DALE HOBSON, poet—*The Water I Carry*

*Preachers will find a wealth of sermon material at Franklin Manor.* REV. DR. DEAN FOOSE, Princeton Theological Seminary (ret)

