

The Manger Stuffed With Cotton

by

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I know now that the customs that prevail at Christmas are as varied as snowflake patterns, but when I was a child the only Christmas for me was the one filled with the Catholic-German traditions at my maternal grandparent's big white house on the hill. .

During the summer when the cherry tree in the garden bore its luscious fruit, Grandpop picked the choicest for the Christmas wine. The entire household was warned that this was strictly "Weinachtsfest" wine, not to be disturbed during its fermentation, and the key to the wine cellar was kept on his chain. I can still remember Grandmom's questioning expression, though, when she would open the vat and find it half full. Of course, Grandpop was "chust testing to see if it vas going in der right vay."

The immediate preparations began on the First Sunday of Advent. The children were sent out to gather evergreens, pine cones, and holly berries. Then Grandmom and Grandpop would make a wreath of these boughs and place four candles on it, one for each week of Advent. On each Monday the family gathered at the big house. Grandpop would read one of the gospels of the birth of Jesus, or another passage from scripture, first in German, then in English, as Grandmom lighted the candles corresponding to the week.

On the last Sunday, the four candles burning brightly as symbols of the imminence of the Light of the World, Grandpop would sing, "O Komm, O Komm, Emmanuel," none wishing more than we children for the speedy arrival of the holiday season.

December 23rd meant Grandmom, my mother and my aunts up to their necks in flour baking "kipfÜls" – nut filled little cookies - and "nüss lochen" - a horseshoe-shaped nut bread. The children were shoved rather unceremoniously, we thought, into the recesses of the warm, white-washed cellar to play, but from there we could smell the goodies, with mouths watering.

We'd spend Christmas Eve in our own homes, getting ready for the Kris Kindle. My delight then, as it is even now, was to place the tiny plaster statue of the Baby Jesus in the wooden manger which I had stuffed with cotton because Grandpop said "In Bethlehem das straw vas so hard it hurt das Jesus Kinderlein. Here we should be kinder to him." It's funny, but we keep the manger filled with cotton. Somehow it all makes me feel that we're helping just a little to make the place warmer and friendlier.

After mass on Christmas Day we all tramped to Grandmom's again with our gifts for one another, a "fröhliches Weinachtsfest" on our lips.

When the turkey was reduced to a mere skeleton and everyone was congratulating Grandpop on his excellent wine, his really big moment came. He'd play "Stille Nacht" with the assistance of his old organ in the parlour (reserved for state occasions), the grown-ups singing with him.

This was when the big event of the day for the children would take place. Grandmom would put a small evergreen tree on the table which we would decorate with suet, bits of bacon, coloured string and bread crumbs. When it was finished, Grandpop would leave his music and set the tree outside in the snow while we peered from behind the kitchen curtains as the birds came to have their Christmas party, too.

We'd go home soon after that, tired out, to be tucked in our beds with our new toys, treasuring the day's memories, mellowing them in our prayers.

It didn't seem strange to me that after a prolonged and serious illness, Grandpop died on December 28th, just three days after the day he loved so well. He had had to live for just one more Christmas. For when he was taken to church for his funeral Mass I still remember how some of the grief I felt was lessened because the altar, instead of being draped in mourning colours, was banked with its Christmas poinsettias, and there in one corner of the Church, Mary and Joseph were still kneeling adoring the Infant

I knew Grandpop wouldn't have wanted it any other way. . God had picked the season dearest to my grandfather, his beloved "Weinachtsfest" for him to find in heaven the eternal Christmas, the wooden manger (which I'm sure is stuffed with cotton) and the Baby Jesus lying there.