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Grandfather's Stories

Ernst Wiechert

It is Christmas Eve on a large Prussian estate shortly after the great upheaval now known as World War I, and several tenants have gathered with their masters—three brothers—for the evening. Christoph, their elderly coachman, has been coaxed into telling a story for old times' sake.

CHRISTOPH SAT on the edge of the hearth next to the forester's wife, smiled and filled his short pipe with fresh tobacco. His threadbare coat of blue cloth was properly brushed and the light of the candles shone on the buttons with the coat of arms and on his white hair. Behind him his shadow fell large and silent on the bright wall.

He smiled at the brothers one after the other and then he looked into the lights and shadows of the tree.

“My grandfather told us this story,” he began. “When his father's father drove the horses, they had a master who was strict and sharp with his tongue. He had been long in military service, right back to the time of the Emperor Napoleon. He was not a hard master, but he had seen much that was hard and cruel during his campaigns, and he was used to order and not to obey.

“One Christmas Eve the grandfather came driving with him from a little town and he drove fast, for it was already time to light the tree. They had been delayed and the snow was falling fast. At that time there were still wolves in the forest, and they had lit the lanterns on the sleigh and the master held a rifle on his knees.

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“When they drove out of the forest and were in sight of the dimly lit windows of the manor house, the grandfather all of a sudden stopped the four horses, for in the light of the lanterns a child stood by the road. It was a small child, a boy, and snow lay on his shoulders. The grandfather said that he was amazed, because there was no snow on the boy's hair, only on his shoulders. And it was snowing fast. But the boy's hair was like gold without a single snowflake on it.

“The child stretched out his right hand—palm upward—as if he wanted to have something put in it. He looked like a laborer's child, only more delicate. He had a happy, smiling face, though he was all alone on the edge of the deep forest, and now when the bells of the sleigh were not ringing any more, they could hear the wolves howl in the distance.

“The horses stood still and were not frightened.

““Drive on, Christoph,” called the master impatiently. ‘It is late.’

“But the grandfather did not drive on. He had folded his hands in the fur gloves over the reins and gazed at the child. Later he said that it had been impossible to take his eyes off the child.

““Drive on, Christoph,” shouted the master and stood up in the sleigh.

“But the grandfather did not drive on. He took the rug from his knees and lifted it a little, and the child put his foot on the runner of the sleigh and sat down at the side of the grandfather. The boy was smiling all the time.

“The master was so angry that he forgot himself. He was not angry over the child, but because the grandfather had not been obedient, and the child had been the cause of the disobedience.

“So the master stood right up in the sleigh in his splendid uniform and his fur coat, grasped the child’s shoulders and tried to throw him into the snow.

“But the child did not move. There he sat smiling and gazing at the horses and their large shadows thrown by the light of the lanterns. The grandfather holding the reins looked on. He said that he could not raise even the little finger of his hand. He was rather taken aback but he was not afraid.

“Then the master jumped out of the sleigh with a terrible curse, a curse which perhaps he had learned in the times of war and death. He stood at the side of the runner, and raised both his arms, meaning to pull the child out of the sleigh.

“But the child did not move. He even raised both hands as if he wanted to show that he was not holding onto anything. And he smiled.

“The snow was still falling in the light of the lanterns, and it was so quiet that the grandfather could hear his heart beat.

“‘Get in, sir,’ he said in a low voice, ‘for Christ’s sake get in.’

“And the miracle was that the master obeyed. He got in and they drove on.

“The grandfather could move his hands again. The child sat quietly at his side. No snowflake was to be seen on his golden hair. But when they drove into the courtyard, they were very much afraid. For in the moment when the sleigh drove below the coat of arms on the archway all the windows suddenly were lit up: the windows of the great house and the windows of all the cottages and the stables. It was so bright that the whole yard was bathed in light—a brightness, the grandfather said, that was not of this earth. All the cottagers came out of their houses, and the animals’ heads appeared at the stable doors, as if they had been

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untied: the horses' heads, the cows', the sheep's. Without making a sound men and animals gazed at the sleigh, which drove up in a sweeping curve and stopped before the flight of steps in front of the manor house. And they all saw the Child—all of them. There was not one who did not see Him.

“The Child was the first to get out of the sleigh. But He did not step down, said the grandfather, He floated—without weight—like a snowflake. He turned round once to the sleigh and smiled, and then He went across the courtyard to a cottage where a little boy lay dying. They all knew that he would not live through the night.

“And when the Child from the sleigh stepped over the threshold of the cottage, the lights round the yard suddenly went out, and the people were as if dazzled and groped their way to the stables to tie up the animals.

“But the grandfather got down from the sleigh and helped his master up the steps, for he could not walk alone. Inside in the large hall where the tree was and where the antlers and the pictures hung on the wall, and where the stuffed birds stood, the master looked about him, as if he were in a dense, unknown forest, and in quite a strange voice he said: ‘I thank you, Christoph.’

“But the cottager's child was well again by the morning.

“Yes,” concluded Christoph in his low, gentle voice, “that was the night when the grandfather drove the Christ-child.”

He got up, took a cinder from the fire for his pipe and sat down again by the hearth.

The candles burned down without a flicker, and in the hush they could hear how the frost was splitting the trees in the forest...

After a long pause, one of Christoph's listeners speaks up and

requests another story. He agrees.

“My grandfather also told this story,” Christoph began. “When the grandfather of his father drove the horses, they had a vicar at the church on the estate who was a shy, humble man and very poor. And he had seven children. In the castle there lived, after a good master whom they had called ‘the Saint,’ a harsh master as happens now and again in wild times. It was still the time of serfdom.

“On Christmas Eve, because he felt lonely, the master had detained the vicar in the manor house and had kept him back, as if he were a sort of toy, which he could take out of a box or put back, when he so minded.

“When the master had drunk a great deal of the hot punch, he wanted to play at dice with the vicar for a couple of gold coins, although he knew that the vicar was as poor as a church mouse.

“The vicar refused. As long as he had been on the estate he had never refused anything, and he knew that it was dangerous to have a will of one’s own. He did not refuse because he was poor. He refused—so he said in his humble way—because the soldiers had cast lots for the garments of Him who was born this night and had lain in a manger.

“The master looked long at him while he shook the dice in the leather box.

“‘Cast the dice, vicar!’ he said.

“But the vicar shook his head.

“‘Once more I say: cast the dice, vicar!’ said the master, and his lips were pale and thin.

“But the vicar shook his head and only folded his hands on the white tablecloth.

“‘If you do not cast the dice—and thus refuse to do what

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your master commands you,' said the master, 'I shall have you whipped like any disobedient servant, and you will be given as many strokes with the whip as I shall throw pips on the dice out of this box. Once more: cast the dice, vicar!'

"But the vicar shook his head.

"Thereupon the master got slowly up, shook the box and let the dice roll on the white cloth. He kept his eyes fixed on the vicar's face, and only after a long pause did he count the pips on the dice. 'Seven, vicar,' he said. 'As many as you have children, for each child the whip will strike you once.'

"He roused all his household and all the serfs on the estate, men and women, and ordered them to come into the large hall. 'This man,' he said, 'has refused to play at dice with me, and thus has treated me, his lord, with contempt. Bind him so that I can have him whipped, seven strokes, one for each of his children, and so that you may learn what it means to treat me with contempt.'

"But none of the people stirred. The grandfather in the foremost row heard how the men groaned and the women wept. But they did not move.

"The master looked sharply at each one of them and then he smiled. 'Your turn will come, too,' he said. And then he called the overseer. The overseer was a hard man, even harder than the master himself, and he stepped forward.

"He bound the vicar to one of the two columns which supported the ceiling of the hall, tore his clothes from his shoulders and struck him seven times across his back. The blood ran from the vicar's white skin, and the men and women went down on their knees and prayed. They had covered their eyes with their hands. The vicar did not utter a sound.

"When they had unbound him, he walked to the table and

looked down on the dice which still lay there as they had rolled out of the box—two—three—two—and then he looked at the master: ‘Pray,’ he said in a low voice, ‘that the Child may look at you tonight, or it will never look at you again.’

“Then he went out of the hall with the others.

“The next morning the master drove to church, as had been the custom since time immemorial.

“He did not walk, though it was not farther than one could throw a stone from a sling. The grandfather went behind him into the church, and left his grandchild with the horses.

“The church was crowded, and the master sat in his carved pew and had folded his hands in their white gauntlets over his prayer book. It was as quiet as the grave.

“The vicar was pale, but otherwise there was nothing to show that anything had happened to him.

“After the prelude, when the little organ began to play the melody of the opening hymn, the vicar raised his eyes from his folded hands and looked at his congregation. For the congregation did not sing. No mouth opened, and everybody’s eyes were fixed on him. They heard how the master stamped his foot once. They heard it, because the wheel of his silver spur clicked.

“But then the master sat quiet and sang. He sang the three verses of the hymn in his high-pitched, melodious voice, and he sang alone with the vicar. No other lips moved. The grandfather said that few events in his life had been as awful as this.

“But the vicar did not look at him who alone sang the Christmas song with him.

“He saw his seven children who sat with their mother opposite the pulpit, and the mother was a thin, bent woman.

“Then the vicar read the Christmas Gospel according to St. Luke; everything was as it always had been. When he had

finished reading, something happened at which the hearts of the faithful trembled once more, for the vicar did not go on to interpret the Gospel, but in a low voice began a solemn memorial address on the life and body of the late Hjalmar von Liljecrona, and the deceased man was sitting opposite him in the old, carved oaken pew and staring as on one whose senses God had darkened.

“‘He died,’ said the vicar, ‘because he had thrown dice for the swaddling clothes of the Child in the manger, and because the Child had turned his eyes away from him. He died, because he had not only thrown dice for the clothes of this holy Child, but for the clothes of seven poor children of this world and with them for the clothes of seventy times seven children.’

“‘And he had died in such a terrible way that he was walking about like a living person without knowing that he was dead, while everyone in the congregation beheld his living corpse and turned away from him shuddering, because he was stinking like the dead man in the story of Lazarus.’

“And the vicar had got so far, when the master jumped to his feet with a frightful curse, pulling his sword out of its scabbard. ‘Take back that word, you devil of a vicar!’ he shouted in a hoarse voice, ‘take back that word!’

“But the vicar did not heed him any more than he would have heeded a breeze wafting through the church, and he folded his hands to pray for the dead and asked the congregation to do the same.

“Then the most terrible thing happened; the master sprang to the foot of the pulpit and, grasping his sword in the middle of the blade, hurled it at the vicar's heart.

“Now beautifully carved in wood in the wall of the pulpit was the mother of Christ holding the Child in her arms and lovingly protecting Him. And the sword—though hurled from

so near—missed the vicar and buried its point in the heart of the Child Jesus, quivering there for a time, like the shaft of an arrow; then it slowly sank, drawn down by the heavy basket-ilt, fell on the pine boards of the floor and broke into a thousand pieces. And my grandfather as well as many others saw a thin trickle of blood run down from the wound in the wood and drip onto the floor and onto the steel of the blade which turned crimson.

“Then for the first time that morning the vicar looked at the master who stood below him. He did not look at him angrily—there was not even reproach in his glance. He only looked at him in deep sorrow, as one may look at a picture of someone who is dead, and he remained so, when the master had fallen on his knees and covered his face with his hands in the long, white gauntlets.

“And so the vicar led him out of the church, slowly, step by step through the kneeling congregation. When the master refused to get into the sleigh, they led him through the snow to the manor house, the vicar on one side, bareheaded, and my grandfather on the other side, the whip in his free hand and an expression of consternation on his face.

“From that hour the master was a ‘changed’ man, as many of his line before him had been ‘changed,’ because it lay in their blood.

“Yes,” concluded Christoph in his low, gentle voice, “that was the night when they cast dice for the Christ-child in the old house.”

Then he took another cinder from the fire for his pipe and sat quietly on the edge of the hearth looking into the candles which were burning down.

Soon after the people started for home, and as they slowly walked through the snow, it was as if the old stories went with

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them, the stories of the old, gloomy houses, where so much happened, but where men could still be changed, if a voice could touch their hearts.

This book is an excerpt from Home for Christmas, available from Orbis Books.

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