

Silent Night

THERE were no bright candles in the front parlours of Hamelin that Christmas Eve; for the Christ Child would not come to a house where there were no children. And the town was very dark and quiet.

Herr Recken and his good wife went to bed very early, but by eleven o'clock they were still lying awake, watching the moonlight throw shadows on the polished oak walls. Frau Recken moved restlessly—really, some of those silhouettes seemed almost lifelike. She must go to sleep—it would be a busy day to-morrow. She shivered: a busy day!



Each Christmas Day, Christina had had a party, for her birthday was the following day, and all the relations would come for dinner, and there would be turkey, and sweetmeats for the children; and Frau Recken remembered sadly the tiny fowl, the few fruits and the brave little iced cake in her enormous larder.

Herr Recken held his wife's hand more tightly—those shadows on the wall were quite disturbing. There was a lean horse's head: he had made an ingenious wooden horse, with a mane and tail of real hair for Christmas; he had begun it in July, in the gloomy little room behind his shop, for he had been so afraid that it might not be ready by Christmas—and how Marie had laughed when he had finished it in six weeks! He had considered seriously making it into a rocking-horse . . . And now Nicki had it; Nicki had so many toys these days, but they did not seem to make him particularly happy. Poor little chap! One felt almost sorry for him—he seemed to be more conscious than ever of his lame leg.

The bells would begin soon — he hoped that Marie would be asleep by then. Herr Recken nearly blushed when he found himself wondering if the bells would sound very sad to-night. Thank goodness he had insisted that they should not go to the Midnight Mass at the Cathedral. Nicki was going to be Joseph in the tableau in the Cathedral porch: the first time he had ever had a part in it. Herr Recken wondered angrily why they had insisted on having it — a lonely and bewildered Joseph guarding the day-old Child. They had been afraid that there might be no more babies in Hamelin, ever, for so many had sickened and died that terrible summer. There will be no Christmas trees to-morrow, he remembered suddenly; no stout, inadequately disguised Santa Claus. There would be no children's choir at the Cathedral to-night, and no carols at an impossibly early hour in the morning.

"It will not be Christmas," he murmured resentfully.

"Ah, Hans," whispered his Marie reproachfully.

"But it is the children's day, dear one. The festival of all the children in the world."

Then the bells began to peal—louder than usual, with an insistence that sounded even defiant.

Patricia Burns

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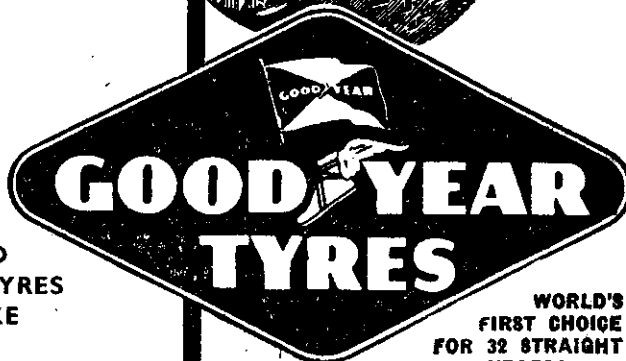
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