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The Carpenter's Christmas

Peter K. Rosegger

AT LAST IT WAS OVER, this vigorous sweeping and scrubbing and chasing of dirt, this week-long turmoil during which nothing, not a piece of furniture, not a single wall decoration, remained in place, until every piece of wood had been cleaned, every stone whitewashed, every bit of metal polished. Now the house shone in purest cleanliness.

The calm after a storm has a solemn effect in any case, but particularly when the Christ Child is about to arrive. Somewhere in the house stands a readied cradle. Those who wear shoes must take them off; and those in their stocking feet must walk on tiptoe, for—He sleeps.

The goodwife bustled around in her rooms purposefully; she had to see that everything was right without marking the floor; check all the chests and closets and windows without touching anything, so that everything would retain its pristine beauty. The wind rattled the windowpanes, blowing snow into every nook and cranny, and the darkness of the skies almost turned the room into night. In the living room, on a table covered with white linen, were a crucifix, a burning blessed candle, and a crock holding a branch cut from the cherry tree three weeks ago on St. Barbara's Day, which was to bloom that night. Its buds glistened and swelled and would burst into flower any moment.

The woman ran to the door, opened it softly, raised her forefinger and hissed, "Pssst!" into the kitchen, where the servant girl wasn't quiet enough with the dishes. "Pssst! The Christ Child is asleep!"

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The goodwife was in a deeply pious mood. Her graying hair was wound around her head in two braids; she had donned her red kerchief and her silk apron. With a rosary in her folded hands she sat in the armchair next to the table and could think of nothing except: Christmas Eve! The Christ Child!

Suddenly there was a noise in the corner. Her husband, the carpenter, who was lying on the bench against the wall, turned around and bumped his elbow so hard against the back rest of the chair that it crashed to the floor.

"Pssst!" she hissed, getting up. "My, but what a restless person you are!"

"I? Restless?" He brushed his hand over his face. "Can't a person sleep any more? Can't you leave me alone?"

"If you don't want to pray, you should at least be quiet, man. And you shouldn't sleep, either!"

"But, old lady, when a man sleeps he makes the least noise."

"So you think! That's when you make the most noise, when you sleep! If you're not upsetting a chair, beating about with your arms, you're poking a hole in the wall. Anyone would think there were at least two sawmills and a threshing machine in here."

"Yea, the sawmills and that threshing machine ought to be turned off on Christmas Eve," he answered calmly, sitting up.

"Oh, don't talk nonsense, please! Here, find yourself a nice Christmas prayer!"

She reached for the prayer book on the shelf, wiped the old, worn binding with her apron—yes, it was already dusty again!—and laid it on the table.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked tranquilly. "When they ring the bell, I'll pray all right. Just now I want to sleep some more."

"Stop arguing!" she cried impatiently, kicking at a footstool

below the table.

He looked at her and grinned. “Woman,” he said. “Not even old age helps you – you simply won’t change!”

“You’re the one to talk!” she answered. “A man ought to remember at least on a day like this, that he has holy water on him. Haven’t you any piety in you at all? Don’t you know that tomorrow is Christmas?”

“Am I doing anything wrong?”

“Nor are you doing anything right, either. Go on, find that Christmas prayer!”

“I’ve never let anyone order me to be pious. If it doesn’t come by itself...”

“Come by itself? To you? Mary and Joseph, that’d be a long wait! All week long you are so unchristian that it’s a scandal. Holidays are made for piety!”

“Oh, phht!” the carpenter replied crossly. “If a man works hard all week and does his duty in God’s name and does nobody any wrong, he’s supposed to be extra pious on Sundays, eh? Why, woman, how is a man to do that?”

“Pray, I said, and keep quiet! Holy Christ will be awakened soon enough when He comes to judge the quick and the dead...Jesus and Mary, what’s that?”

For a moment it was quite dark in the room, as if a black cloth had been drawn across the window; then a heavy thud, and the wild whirling of the snow outside. The carpenter went to the window and looked out. The storm had broken off a heavy limb from the old fir tree standing in front of the house.

“Oh God, oh God, what a day!” the woman whined, wringing her hands. “That’s a bad sign for a year without peace!”

“If the devil doesn’t fetch you, it’ll be just that,” the carpenter growled amiably.

“Today I refuse to argue with you!” she answered with

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cold superiority. "But just you wait until the day is over. Then you'll see whom the devil will fetch!"

She took a little vessel of holy water from the door-jamb and sprinkled everything in the room, especially her husband. He stared at her grumpily and refused to stir.

"He doesn't even make the sign of the cross when he is sprinkled with holy water!"

She rushed to the kitchen, returned with a basin of glowing embers, sprinkled incense over it and carried it around, according to the old Christmas custom, close to the table, to the bed and, finally, to her husband, whose nostrils the incense attacked so vehemently that he began to curse and opened a window.

He opened the window just in time. From the road, over the whistling of the wind, came excited voices. The wind had done a good deal of damage in the village. The Widow Cenzi's roof had been torn off so that you could look from above into the crawling children's warren.

"That's because they don't pray, those people," the carpenter's wife sneered. "Mary and Joseph, that's how it is in this world. The entire Christmas Eve spoiled! And instead of saying his Christmas prayers now, he runs away! Who, I ask you, is to protect us, if not our dear Lord in heaven?"

The Widow Cenzi had three small children, the oldest of which was sick in bed with scarlet fever. She wasn't much liked in the village and it was said that in the fall she sometimes harvested potatoes where she hadn't planted any. Now the roof of her hut was torn down, with the shingles lying in the road, and the widow stumbled around with her children in the darkness trying to place them with friendly neighbors. Nobody wanted to harbor the child sick with scarlet fever until the teacher offered to take it in; but the teacher was ruled

out because he might carry the infection into the school. The childless wife of the carpenter, too, was approached, but she didn't want her Christmas Eve spoiled by a sick child. Finally the village priest remembered that He who was expected that very night had said that whoever takes in a child, takes in Him—even though he wasn't quite certain how the quotation really ran. And so, with kindness and the help of the quotation, he arranged with his housekeeper for the sick child to stay at the vicarage until the roof of the old home could be fixed, at least temporarily.

The carpenter had gone outside. His voice was louder than the wind as he called together his neighbors and his journeymen. They came with ladders, tools and boards. There was a hammering and sawing in the village that lasted all night under the light of the improvised torches—very much to the horror of the carpenter's goodwife, who esteemed the holy calm and heavenly peace of this night above all else. "How can the cherry branch bloom in all this turmoil? And how is the Christ Child to rest?"

When the bells in the church tower began to chime for Midnight Mass the men still shouted and hammered on the Widow Cenzi's roof. And while the parish sang in the church, the pounding and clanking of nails and tools still vied so with the noise of the storm that the women, thus cheated out of their Christmas humor, were positively horrified. At last, when all the bells tolled in unison and the organ jubilated at the high point of the Midnight Mass, the men who were helping to build the roof jumped down and strolled into the church too; and the carpenter found himself alone with two of his journeymen on the skeleton of the roof. The storm seemed to blow harder now, to tear down again what the hands of men had just put up.

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The carpenter had expected to have the roof ready before morning. When he saw that most of the others had deserted him and that even the boys who had held the torches had thrown them in the snow and run to church, he began to curse mightily.

“To hell with the damn hypocrites! They practically chew off the toes of our good Lord; but in the meantime they let these poor wretches die of cold. They’ll squat in the pews until they rot. But God in heaven can’t really be proud of them. What a viper’s brood! Hear them sing: ‘Praise God in the highest!’ And see how they kiss the waxen image of the Christ Child and cuddle it like a doll—while these poor little creatures are so cold they’ll soon croak!”

When Midnight Mass was over and the people came out of the church, the carpenter was still up on his roof, working away, and cursing. One man said to the other, “Poor fellow, he’ll go completely mad if we don’t help him; and maybe we are a little to blame for his swearing, at that! Come on, let’s pitch in. We can have that roof up in less than an hour.”

Then another planted himself firmly in front of the speaker and said: “Do you really think, neighbor, that I would be so unchristian as to work on Holy Christmas Morn?” But his manner was so overbearing that the effect was far from what he intended.

“Did you hear that one?” someone asked. “In the face of such hypocrisy, I prefer the carpenter and all his cussing; and I, for one, am going to help him finish that roof!”

Others joined him. The torches were lit again and the sawing and hammering began once more with such renewed vigor that the carpenter’s wife, in desperation, covered both her ears with her hands. “You can’t sleep and you can’t pray with all this noise going on. And that – that heathen husband of mine

prefers this beggar woman to our Jesus Child, so that he won't even let Him rest in His cradle... God forgive him!"

On Christmas day when the sun rose, the icy wind still rushed over the rooftops, and over many a gable snow clouds still danced. But the roof of the Widow Cenzi's house was fixed and nailed down tight, a good fire crackled in her stove, and the woman with her children had returned to their home. The carpenter was lying on his bed, jacket and boots and all, snoring with a right good will. His wife stood in the doorway, staring at him in disgust.

She herself could not settle down. She was miserable. Even before the solemn High Mass she went over to the vicarage, but she could hardly say a single word between her sobs. What an unhappy woman she was, she finally managed to stammer, to have such a husband! True, he was usually quiet and industrious, but he had simply no religion! Just no religion at all! And if she were to live to be a hundred, she would never forget that night!

"Not a single Our Father did he say, nor did he welcome the Christ Child with so much as a single short prayer! What an end such a man will come to! Even this morning, people are going from house to house telling each other that they have never heard anyone curse as much as this husband of mine on Holy Night! You must have heard it yourself, Your Reverence, after Midnight Mass! I was shivering in my soul!"

The priest sat with his hand folded in his lap and smiled benevolently at the distracted woman. "To be sure, I heard something," he said. "But I thought it was a prayer!"

"Prayer?" the woman moaned, raising her hands and folding them high above her head, then letting them fall again as if she had had a stroke.

"My dear woman," the priest replied. "Some people have

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strange ways of praying. The Jews, for example, wind their prayer-belts around their heads and arms when they pray. Others just turn the leaves of their prayer books. And still others pass the beads of their rosaries through their fingers. Well, our carpenter simply hammers nails into wooden shingles during his Our Father.”

The woman again clasped her hands in despair. “Did you say ‘Our Father,’ Your Reverence? Some Our Father that would be! How he cursed and shouted during Holy Mass! If our dear Lord weren’t so kind, the earth would have opened and swallowed him!”

“I admit,” the priest replied, “that his words may have been chosen somewhat—unfortunately. But his intentions were certainly good. And that’s really what counts. All the while he was cursing and shouting, I’m sure he didn’t have another thought in his head other than to provide a roof for the poor widow and her children and his conviction that other men ought to be helping him. We probably all prayed devoutly last night, but I have an idea that the carpenter’s prayer with his saw and hammer pleased our Good Lord the most.”

“And now,” the woman cried, “when the others are on their way to High Mass, he lies sleeping like a...a donkey!”

“Let him sleep, my dear woman. Just as his work was his prayer, so is his rest.”

As the carpenter’s wife departed, she kept shaking her head. She could make neither head nor tail of all this. What was the world coming to? If cursing was praying, what then was praying? But she didn’t get quite that far in her meditations.

This story is an excerpt from “Home for Christmas” available from Plough Publishing.

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