



The Christkindl's Gift

A Novella

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Publisher: Fleming H Revell
ISBN: 0-8007-1871-2

Excerpt courtesy of www.kathleenmorgan.com

Colorado, December 5, 1913

“Erich. Erich! Wake up. *Es ist St. Nicholasabend!*”

At the insistent voice and small hand shaking him by the shoulder, Erich Hannack had no choice but to crack open one eye. His seven-year-old sister Rosa, clad in a long-sleeved white nightgown, one pale blond braid hanging loose and all but undone and the other end clutched in her fist, knelt beside him on his bed. Outside, the wan December sun was, even now, barely illuminating the new day.

He groaned and rolled over. “Go back to sleep, Rosa. It's too early to get up.”

“But, Erich! It's St. Nicholas Eve! Don't you care?”

Erich grabbed at his pillow, pulling it from beneath him to cover his head. Nicholas Eve was the night when St. Nicholas, carrying his crozier and dressed in his red cloak and gold bishop's mitre, came with gifts. “Of course I care,” he growled from under his pillow. “I'll just care more when I'm fully awake.”

“*Ach*, Erich. You're such a big *Dummkopf!*” With a tug, his sister wrenched the pillow from his head. “I've an idea. A most wonderful idea!”

It was hopeless, Erich thought. Further sleep was out of the question. “And what might that most wonderful idea be?” he asked with his best, long-suffering, ten-year-old brother tone.

Rosa giggled. “You know you want to hear my idea. You know it, Erich Hannack!”

He flipped back over, eyed her with lifted brow, then pulled free the braid end that was now in his sister's mouth. The tip was wet and dark gold. “That's so disgusting. Why do you suck on your hair?”

She shrugged, unperturbed. “Because it makes me feel good and helps me think. Why else?”

“Well, tell me about your most wonderful idea, will you? Before you have to stick the whole braid in your mouth, anyway.”

“I wouldn't do that. That's disgusting!”

Erich rolled his eyes. “The idea, Rosa. Tell me the idea.”

“*Ja, ja.*” As if settling in for an extended sojourn, Rosa moved closer, sat on her heels, and folded her hands demurely in her lap. “Do you remember last night when *Grossvater* told us the story about *Sankt Nicholas*?”

“Grandfather *always* tells us that story the night before St. Nicholas Eve. You know that, Rosa.”

“*Ja,*”—her small head bobbed in agreement—“but this time he also told us that some children write letters to give to *Sankt Nicholas*. Letters for the *Christkindl*.”

“And St. Nicholas finds the children's letters and takes them to the Christ Child, leaving behind nuts, sweets, and gifts in the shoes of all good girls and boys.” Erich yawned hugely. “So, what's all that to us?”

Rosa began to bounce on the bed, grinning. “We need to write the *Christkindl* a letter, of course. A letter asking Him to bring us a new *Vater*.”

Erich jerked up, nearly knocking his sister off the bed. “A new father? Are you crazy in the head? *Mutti* would never—”

“She'd have to, if the Baby Jesus sent him. Wouldn't she, Erich?”

His sister had a point. Their mother was always saying how important it was to take whatever God gave you, and be thankful for it. But this was a very big, and very important, gift.

He scratched his head. “Well, maybe she would. And it isn't as if *Mutti* isn't lonely. Sometimes, when she thinks I'm not looking, she still cries. I know she misses Father. And Grandfather could sure use help with all the ranch work. I try, but I'm just not big or strong enough yet. And he's not been feeling well these past few months.”

“Well, I'm lonely, too.” Rosa slipped her braid end back into the corner of her mouth. “I miss having a *Vater*. Someone to sing me to sleep when *Mutti's* too busy to do it. Someone to carry me on his shoulders. And, now that it's winter, someone to pull me on my sled.” She nodded resolutely. “*Ja*, we need a new *Vater*.”

The more Erich considered it, the more he knew his sister was right. Who would've thought such an idea could come from a girl, and a very small one at that? But it had and he wasn't such a *Dummkopf* to ignore a wonderful idea, no matter its source.

“*Ja*, you're right, Rosa.” His mind racing, Erich drew up his legs and rested his chin on his knees. “We *do* need a new father. And who better than the *Christkindl* to send us the perfect one?”

“*Mutti, Mutti! Es schneit. Es schneit!*”

At her daughter's excited cry later that afternoon, Anna Hannack glanced up from the loaf of bread she was kneading. Beyond the lace curtains framing one of the ranch house's kitchen windows, fat, white flakes were indeed floating lazily by. She smiled, wiped her flour-coated hands on her apron, and walked to where her daughter stood, her button nose pressed to the rapidly frosting glass.

“Yes, Rosa,” Anna said, putting extra emphasis on the words, “*it is snowing*. You must remember to speak the English, not German.”

“Och, she knows the words well enough, *Mutti*,” Erich muttered from his seat at the other end of the kitchen table. “She just gets excited and forgets. Between sucking on her hair and forgetting to speak English, it happens all the time at school. And then the other children are very quick to correct her.”

Anna frowned and glanced back at her son. Ever since her husband Karl's death a year and a half ago, her daughter had reverted to some of her more childish behaviors. “But not in an unkind way, I hope? The other students don't make Rosa feel bad or cry, do they?”

Erich shrugged. “Most don't, but then many of them at least know, if don't also speak, *Deutsch*.”

“German, Erich. It's called German in America.”

“*Ja, ja*.” Her son expelled an exasperated breath and returned to the wooden horse he was carving. “I know.”

With a soft chuckle, Anna turned back to her daughter. “Look how fast the snow falls, Rosa. We'll soon be covered in a blanket of white.”

“But, *Mutti*.” Rosa wheeled about so quickly her braids all but slapped her cheeks. “How will *Sankt Nicholas* travel through the snow? What if he gets lost and cannot find our h-house t-tonight?” Her rosebud mouth trembled, and tears filled her bright blue eyes.

Tonight was *Nicholasabend*. Rosa and Erich already had their best pair of shoes cleaned and polished, awaiting but their bedtime this evening to place them on the covered front porch. The Advent wreath notwithstanding, as far as the children were concerned, St. Nicholas Eve truly marked the beginning of the Christmas season.

Anna laid a hand on her daughter's shoulder. "Don't worry, *Liebling*," she crooned, using the German word for darling. "St. Nicholas will find our house. If need be, the *Christkindl* will show him the way."

"The Christ Child had certainly better." Erich glanced up from his intent work and cast a dark look at the snow which was now coming down even harder and faster. "We've an important message for St. Nicholas to give Him. And it *has* to be delivered before Christmas Eve, it does."

"*Ja*," Rosa piped up, nodding her head in fervent agreement. "It has to, *Mutti*. It just *has* to!"

Their mother eyed them, her mouth quirking in bemusement. Though the custom of writing notes to the Child Jesus wasn't uncommon, neither of her two children had ever done so in the past. Not in Germany, where they had lived until three and a half years ago when their father had gotten it into his head to immigrate to America in the hopes of attaining a better life for them all, and not in the past Christmases since on their small ranch outside the thriving, German immigrant-founded town of Wolfsburg, Colorado.

But then, Anna recalled with a sharp pang, Karl had always been the incurable dreamer and eternal optimist in the family. Dear, sweet, trusting Karl, gone now from their lives.

The old longing and pain welled up, threatening to squeeze what little joy she had managed finally to regain, threatening to squeeze it back into that all too familiar, aching lump in the middle of her chest. *Ach*, how she yearned to return to her beloved *Deutschland*, to the dear house in Rüdeshheim with its wondrous views of the Rhine River and verdant, vineyard-covered hills! There'd be no beloved Karl anymore to share it with, but at least there she'd be safe. There she'd belong.

Her father-in-law, however, wouldn't hear of it. There was nothing left for them in Germany, Anton Hannack had firmly informed her. Nothing but grinding poverty and scant hope of a future for her or his grandchildren. Would she shame her husband's name, belittle everything his son had ever wanted for his family, by turning her back on all they had already gained in coming to America? Give it a chance, Anton had urged. Trust in Karl's vision even if you cannot find one of your own. America's a wonderful land; we'll make our place here, you'll see.

But her father-in-law didn't understand. He hadn't lost his spouse in a strange, hostile land. Anton's wife had died a peaceful death ten years ago, not as a result of, in Christian charity, taking in two men for the night and having the ungrateful wretches try to rob them in their sleep.

Not in bleeding to death in his wife's arms, even as he struggled to the end to fathom why men he had welcomed had killed him.

She didn't care what her father said. She'd never trust a stranger again and, as far as she was concerned, America was and would always be a land of strangers.

"*Mutti*?" A sudden, sharp tug on her sleeve jerked Anna back to the present. She looked down into the stricken face of her daughter.

“*Ja* , Rosa? What is it now?”

“The letter for the *Christkindl* . We *must* get it to St. Nicholas.”

Banishing her somber thoughts for her child's sake if not for her own, Anna laughed and knelt to meet Rosa's anxious gaze eye-to-eye. “And what could possibly be so important that, if need be, couldn't wait for another year? Hmm, *Liebling* ?”

Rosa's eyes grew wide. “Well, we were going to ask—”

“Rosa! *Nein* !” Erich scraped back his chair, jumped up, and hurried over. “It's a wonderful surprise, *Mutti* . A wonderful surprise for us all. You'll have to wait until Christmas, though.”

“Hmm, I will, will I?” Anna glanced from one child to the other. Rosa's face was flushed; Erich's was pale. They were both hiding something. They were also very excited.

“Well, I suppose I can wait until Christmas,” she said at last, not wishing to ruin whatever surprise was apparently so dear to the both of them. “*If* you can keep a secret as big as this one seems for that long.”

Erich gave a whoop of laughter. “You'll just have to wait and see, won't you, *Mutti* ?”

Anna grinned at her tousled-haired son, thinking, for one fleeting moment more, how much he looked like Karl with his snapping, dark brown eyes and light brown hair. *Ach, Karl, Karl*, she thought. *If only you were here, you'd be so proud of your son.*

Then she stood, turned, and headed back to the counter where her bread still waited. “*Ja* , I'll have to wait and see. In the meanwhile, though, I'd better get the bread in the oven, or supper won't be ready by the time your grandfather returns from town.”

Her braid once more free of her mouth, Rosa hopped around on one foot until she reached her mother's side. “Maybe *Grossvater* will meet St. Nicholas on the way, and bring him home to us.”

Erich snorted in disdain. “*Ach* , and sure that'll happen! What a big *Dummkopf* you are sometimes, Rosa.”

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