

# Arts and Ideas

## A Christmas remembered

By JOHN SOMMER

Some quiet nights ago I woke up and thought of a Christmas over 60 years in the past. I will try to write down what I remember.

The Dutch tile stove in the nursery is spreading a cosy warmth, and the sweet scent of hot apples that wafts out of the stove's warming box, is mouthwatering. Ice flowers grow on the window panes, and with their warm breath, two boys, aged three and nine, blow holes into the thin layer of ice to watch what is happening in the farmyard outside and below.

Not much is happening, the work on the farm has moved indoors. The yard is still and while under the thick blanket of winter. In the nursery, a canary flies, a swift, yellow dart of bright color, from its open cage to the toy chest and from there to its favorite resting place, the shoulder of the older boy.

These two are inseparable. The nanny, in her chair close to the stove, is knitting. Christmas is only days away.

The faint music of sleighbells. Through their spy holes the boys see the big horse-drawn sleigh with their parents dashing into view. The older boy yells "hur- ray, they are back", and he jumps away from the window and races to the door. "Close the door after you," calls the nanny, and the running boy shuts the door with a BANG.

The canary, who is always following my brother only a yard behind, gets caught by the door and is instantly killed.

My brother is inconsolable. He puts the small heap of blood and feathers in a box and does not part from it. He sits alone in his room with the box in his hands and is shaken by sobs not even our nanny is able to stop.

Days later, on Christmas Eve,



**John Sommer**  
IDEAS AND THE ARTS

my parents decide to drive with us to town in the afternoon, to have a look at the Christmas Fair. My brother refuses to go. He is heartbroken and all the temptations of the world cannot make him forget his beloved companion.

We others bundle up in blankets and furs for the sleigh ride to town. The two fine horses pull us along smoothly. The crystal sound of the bells puts a spell over the land. The sun shines, the snow is blindingly white, the familiar road becomes an avenue of bliss. I am tucked in between my parents. Flakes of snow blow against my face and make it tingle. Ahead of us rise the spires of the old town. Out of a hundred chimneys, plumes of smoke billow towards a very blue sky.

My father stables the horses in the "Inn of the Golden Lion". That done we walk around in a bewildering miniature town of stalls, criss-crossed by lanes, that fill the vast market square to the bursting point.

I am surrounded by wonders and do not know where to look first.

A Punch and Judy show, a carousel with children riding

prancing horses, gingerbread in all shapes, nutcrackers, the carved figures of Mary and Joseph and the child Jesus; toys in all possible materials, fantastic tree decorations made of glass. A barrel organ player with a monkey. Sausages sizzle over open fires, and large braziers are standing here and there to warm traders and customers alike.

And wonder of wonders, above me, in the rafters of a stall close to a brazier going full blast, hangs a cage with a canary like the one my brother is mourning over. To me, that is a miracle. How can there be another bird like the lost one?

I pull at my mother's skirt and point to the bird in the cage. My parents buy the bird and we take it to the inn. Soon we go home, with the cage safely hidden under our covers. It is almost dark when we get back to the farm. A few deer that have assembled around a feeding station in the park, look up and watch the passing sleigh.

Later that night a bell summons the household to the livingroom, where an awesome tree shines with the flickering light of many candles. There are presents, of course, but all I remember is my brother's face when he discovers the resurrected bird in its cage.

I sense, though I am very young, how his aching heart is mending. Since the terrible killing, remorse had darkened his eyes.

Now they light up in anticipation. He is returning to us from his self-imposed exile.

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