



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

Two Christmases

Unknown writer

I.

It was the time of the great war. Germany was desolated. Towns and villages were destroyed by flames. Order and law had given way to savage power; and from the walls of many a ruined house of God the wooden image of the Saviour looked down with a face of anguish on the horrors of the degenerate times.

The terrified citizens of towns that were still untouched by war, hid themselves within their narrow walls, awaiting, in tremulous fear, the day on which their homes must also fall a prey to plundering soldiers. If any one were obliged to go beyond the boundaries, he would glance anxiously at the bushes on either side of the road; and when night came on, he would be forced to look with horror and sorrow at the reddened horizon, where a little village or lonely hamlet was burning to ashes.

But who is it cowers there in the ditch by the highway? A dried-up little man with deathly-pale countenance, and clad in a black coat! Flee, Wanderer! let him not gaze at you with his piercing gray eyes! Beware! for that old man is the Plague-man!

The heart of the Wanderer sinks within him. Horrified he rushes away, and thanks heaven when, in the gray of the morning, he sees again the towers of his native town. Enraptured by the sight of home he believes these towers with the dear, well-known faces can protect him; but the old cripple has been quicker than he. Before break of day he has knocked at the town-gate, and the gate-keeper, on opening it, has scarcely looked into his gray eyes before he sank down as though some one had felled him with an axe.

Then the gray old man begins his terrible work. Like a bat he slips into all dwellings; no gate and no bolt is an obstacle to him. Right up into the lofts he climbs and opens the most secret chamber. That threshold he passes is doomed to the Black-death.

It had happened thus to a little town in Franconia, where but a few houses remained untouched by the terrible plague. In this town there lived a poor, honest couple with their child, a boy of nearly three years. Their cottage lay on a small hill, and was divided from the road by a little garden. People ascribed it to

this that the awful spirit for a long time had left their home untouched. But at last he seemed to have found his way to even this out-of-the-way place.

A few days before Christmas the boy fell sick, and on Christmas morning he lay motionless in bed, so that the poor parents thought the plague had taken their child from them. The father wanted to bury the body at once, but the mother showed him the rosy cheeks of the dead child, and said that a death that looked so like sleep could do them no harm. Thereupon she went into the little garden and cut box-tree leaves from under the snow, and made a wreath for the dead darling. She placed the wreath on his curly head and moved his bed into the middle of the room, where she set candles burning around it, just as we do in quieter times for a dear departed one. Then she went into the wood, cut down a small Christmas-tree and placed it, all decorated with lights, nuts, and bright tinsel, next to the coffin, in order that the dead child might also have his Christmas pleasure.

This was the only Christmas-tree that the poor stricken town lit up! People passing along the road looked with secret jealousy at the illuminated window, wondering how they could still rejoice in such bitter times. But no gladsome sounds from the window reached the street, where flake after flake was whirling down from the gray heavens, covering everything in its white cloak. And unceasingly, as flake after flake sank down to earth, so in the little chamber the tears of the poor woman rolled down her cheeks till the lights of the Christmas-tree burned low, the fire in the stove died away, and sleep closed the streaming eyes of the mother. Then all was quiet, very quiet, in the little chamber.

But at the gates of Heaven it was very noisy that evening. Countless hosts were crowding up the broad stairway, young and old, rich and poor: a mixed and motley crowd. There the patrician elbowed the tailor who had made his coat; the general the lowest sutler; and a ragged beggar was even next to a king, who drew his purple closer around him in order not to be contaminated. All were pushing towards the great, light gate, and many a one, who on earth had only beaten and jostled others, received here in the crowd his own first jostling. At the gate stood a beautiful, tall angel, who sprinkled each one with water out of a golden vessel. The touch of this water obliterated at once all remembrance of the past.



St. Peter, who considered the noise and bustle too much of a good thing, was of the opinion that mankind had none of the bother of dying, all the work falling on him; and he was accordingly grumbling to himself. Suddenly he saw a little fellow, clad only in a shirt, standing before him, shivering all over, and regarding him with innocent, childish eyes, as if asking whether he might enter. St. Peter, unwilling that such little folks should cause delay in business, said, roughly, "In with you!" The little frightened fellow rushed, thereupon, so quickly through the gate that the angel did not have time to sprinkle him with the waters of oblivion.

Now, as children of two years have but short memories and very harmless pasts, the angel smilingly let him slip by. Once inside, little Hans was seized by a host of flying angels and whirled away to Paradise, which was more beautiful than the fairest garden on earth. Rare plants with big, magnificently colored blossoms filled the air with spicy odor. Here dwelt the tiny children who had left earth before they knew anything of it. Here they could dream on forever; and their breath swept softly over every bud. Large butterflies with silken wings were bathing in the clear ether, and floating entranced from bud to bud. The heavens glittered and lightened as though composed of millions of diamonds; yet the sun did not blind the eye, nor the warmth rise to summer heat. Eternal spring had banished from these regions battle and death, tempest and decay, and far away below in misty distance lay all the sorrows of tormented creation. Amongst the flowers wandered blissful forms, absorbed in the beauty of surrounding harmony.

The boy curiously observed all this splendor, peered into the dewy buds of the flowers, examined the wings of his heavenly playmates, and was not a little rejoiced on observing that two wings had also grown on him, with which he could fly like a bird. "If neighbor Liesel could only see me!" thought Hans, and he felt quite proud at the thought. For, notwithstanding all the splendor about him, the picture of his parents' home presented itself constantly to his little mind. He had an excellent memory of the much despised earth, which soon with magnetic power drew all his thoughts towards it. At the sight of the wonderful flowers of Paradise, such as the earth never produces, he could think of nothing but the violets, and crocuses, and tulips which curled up in spring-time out of the black earth of his father's garden. The golden fruits on the trees reminded him of the gilded ones of the Christmas-tree, and seemed to him even brighter; and although the Paradise of heaven, with its eternal clearness, was a thousand times more beautiful than the changing air below, yet the little heart felt a dim yearning for the beloved earth, the griefs of which he had not yet learned to measure; and, amidst all this angelic beauty, he only felt an uncontrollable longing for the plain, human countenance of his mother. Then there came an end to his enjoyment. He began to cry, and, finally, to roar lustily. The other little angels gathered astonished around him, staring at the strange playmate who

had dewdrops in his eyes and made such awful faces. Such a thing did not generally occur in heaven, where all were good and quiet. But just then St. James came along and, on seeing the crying angel, he spoke pleasantly to him, and finally took him up in his arms in order to comfort him. But a great surprise lay in store for the Saint; for it would have been easier for him to convert a thousand heathens than to quiet the little unruly fellow, who commenced kicking and wriggling, and made such a terrible outcry that the angels fluttered away in consternation. There stood the Saint with the child in his arms, and did not know what to do! At last he concluded to show the strange being to the Lord Himself, and went with the little one before His throne. Then the Lord Almighty smiled, and all the angels around His throne smiled, when they saw St. James, who certainly did not seem very well adapted for nursing children, and in whose arms little Hans, regardless of all surroundings, continued to roar unmercifully. But the merciful Lord opined that the greatest squallers often turned out the best men, and He ordered an angel to carry the little one back to dear earth.

And this was done. With mighty strokes of his pinions the heavenly messenger floated back to earth, which came nearer and nearer with its mountains, lakes, and rivers, and with the old, lifeworn town, and from out the town rose up the gabled roof of the parents' home with a cap of snow upon it.

The boy in the coffin opened his eyes, and with a cry of joy his mother pressed him to her heart. Among the boughs of the Christmas-tree there was a soft rustling and whispering.

Methinks the tree remembered that winter is only a deep sleep, and was dreaming of spring.

II.

The years of misery and war were over. In the streets of the old town, where only a few years ago the roll of the drum resounded, and where the plague, in deathly silence, had spread its black wings, there, the stork on the town-hall heard, to his great satisfaction, merry shouts of children,—the ringing laugh of peace. A group of boys chased each other noisily over the market-place, playing at war. War! which had desolated so many of their homes. Oh! the fresh, merry laughter of childhood! how like unto ivy it climbeth over all ruins and findeth at last the sunshine!

But there was one not amongst the noisy group, and that one was Hans. His parents perceived with anxiety that the little noisy child had grown into a silent, shy boy, who avoided the games of his comrades and dreamingly went his own way. For hours he sat in the garden on the bench near his mother's flowers, and gazed dreamingly at the busy bees and butterflies, or lay in the woods near by and stared up through the branches of the beech-trees at the blue sky.

"What are you thinking of?" his mother would ask at times; then he would start up like one awakened from sleep, the thread of whose dreams are broken by awaking. "He is ill," the mother would think, anxiously. But folks would shake their heads suspiciously when, on speaking to the boy, they received no other answer than a shy, questioning look. "There is something wanting," said some, with an unmistakable gesture. "He is a fool," murmured others.

Thus a boy fares who has peeped too early into Paradise. The children of his own age made fun of him, and poor Hans would have been quite forsaken if Liesel from next door had not taken his part. She was quite the opposite to him,—merry and high-spirited. Whilst he sat dreaming, she was romping about, singing and laughing. But the children kept together, and the parents thought they might some day be a pair. The boy's reserved nature vexed the father, and, being of the opinion that man's hand cannot learn too early to handle and knead the tough clay of existence, he apprenticed him to a potter, in the hope that time would change the character of his son. He was mistaken, however; the boy grew up a fine, handsome youth, but in character he remained the boy of former days. If he looked up from his work it was not in order to gaze, like other journeymen, after a young girl who maybe was tripping past; but to stare up at the sky, which shone so blue between the houses, or to follow with his eyes the great white clouds away,—who knows whither? In his free time he did not go like others to the market-place, but would mount the ramparts at the back of his parents' house and gaze into the valley below, where the river was bearing its silvery wavelets into the far distance. What might not be in the far distance? Far, far away yonder must be the place where the dream of his childhood was realized! How astonished, then, was his father, when one fine sunny spring morning his son stood before him, with knapsack and staff, in order to bid him farewell before setting out on his travels. Who would ever have thought he would want to travel! The father rejoiced in the belief that the son would seek work according to the custom of journeymen workmen, and gave him his blessing, and much good advice besides. But he hardly even heard the words and advice of his father; there was a singing in his ears and a mist before his eyes, so that he felt like one intoxicated. Yes, he was a fool! Nor did he see the tears his mother and Liesel were shedding at his departure: he only thought of that far-off land, of the dream of his childhood. What mattered to him their tears! He wanted only to travel to find his Eden. And he travelled. With each rising sun he arose and thought, "To-day you will find what you seek;" and when he laid himself down tired at night, he thought, "To-morrow I shall reach my goal;" and, happy in this thought, he would fall asleep. No mountain was too steep for him, no path too stony, no forest too dense; he thought of his Eden, and minded not the thorns that tore his flesh. Yes, he was a fool!

Far behind him, forgotten, lay his home in the dim distance!

No living creature could tell him where his Paradise lay! The birds of the forest went on with their song; the deer gazed at him astonished; the brooks babbled on monotonously and sought the way to the ocean. People he asked only laughed, and they looked back at the strange lad, shaking their heads.

Quickly the time flew by; the spring faded, summer and autumn passed, and still he wandered on. His path, that once lay before him green and fair, was now covered with snow. He, however, heeded it not, and journeyed on. It must come at last, the long-sought goal! At last he reached a mighty snow-covered mountain range, so mighty that he said to himself, "Beyond this it must surely lie," and in glad hope passed forward. A whole day he ascended over snow and ice: his feet were sore and bruised, and he was shivering from the cold, and yet no hut was to be seen that might offer him shelter. The sun went down in crimson behind the ice-armored mountains, leaving behind a bitter coldness, so great that the stars in the heavens shivered with frost.

Then it occurred to tired Hans that it was Christmas, and for the first time on his journey he thought for a long while of home, where the Christmas-tree was now lighting up the warm room, and the dear ones were assembling around it. But what mattered the Christmas-tree to him; he was seeking Paradise!

Suddenly he saw on the roadside an old man. He was sitting on his bundle, and leaning his head on his hands. He must have been very old, for his face was furrowed like the bark of an oak, and his snowy beard hung nearly to the ground.

Then tired Hans rejoiced, greeted him, and asked how far it might be to the nearest habitation of man.

"To-day you can no longer reach it," replied the old man. "Whither are you journeying?"

"I seek Paradise," answered Hans: "nearly a year have I wandered over the earth, and yet have not found it."

Thereupon the old man arose, laid his hands upon Hans's shoulder, and said, "Turn back and go home! I have wandered for more than a thousand years on earth, and sought Paradise, and have not found it. Know, then, I am Ahasuerus, doomed to everlasting wandering as a penance. Wherever I go I am persecuted; where I knock the gate is locked; and nowhere have I a home. Stones are my bed, and my bundle is my pillow. Go, poor fool! return to the place of your birth. There, some day, they will dig a grave for you, wherein you may sleep peacefully. Go back to your home, where a Christmas-tree is lit up for you, and where you are loved, and leave to me all wandering and seeking: to me, the poor, old, accursed man!"

Then Hans was very sad: he threw down his bundle, sat down in the snow, and

wept bitterly. However, he was so tired from the long journey that he soon forgot all his misery, and fell into a deep slumber. The old man spread his cloak over him to protect him from the cold, and then listened to the deep-drawn breathing of precious sleep, that drowns all cares. The youth lying there could sleep, and die, and forget! but he himself must keep awake, and live, and wander!

Upon the face of Hans a smile was playing; he was dreaming! Did he see the long-sought Paradise? He saw in his dream a house with snow-covered gable and little windows; a small house, closely encircled by other houses, a garden in front. In a room inside sat his parents round a cheerful fire. The spinning-wheel whizzed, and the cat purred in comfort in front of the fire. Softly there fell, now and again, a needle from the Christmas-tree. A resinous, pine-tree odor filled the room. From the next house a clear, maiden's voice was singing the old, old Christmas carol,—

"A rose has bloomed
From a tender root,
Our fathers have sung:
Out of Jesse it came."

And the crackling of the fire, the whizzing of the spinning-wheel, and the maiden's song seemed to the dreamer fairer than a thousand Edens. An indescribable homesickness overcame him.

When he awoke, the east was radiant with the blush of morning. He sprang up and seized his staff. Scales seemed to fall from his eyes. "Home, home!" a thousand voices seemed to echo within him.

But up the mountains, outlined by the red of the morn, he saw the old man wandering on his comfortless path.

Stories help us explore cultures, learn moral lessons, connect with nature — or simply have fun. That's why riri.ro offers 3,000+ free stories — fairy tales, fables, bedtime stories, myths and more — for every age, in 13 languages, with free printable PDFs and often audio. Reading should be a right, not a privilege. Share riri.ro and spread the joy of reading.

Instagram: [@riri_ro_reading](https://www.instagram.com/riri_ro_reading) · Pinterest: [pinterest.com/ririocom](https://www.pinterest.com/ririocom)