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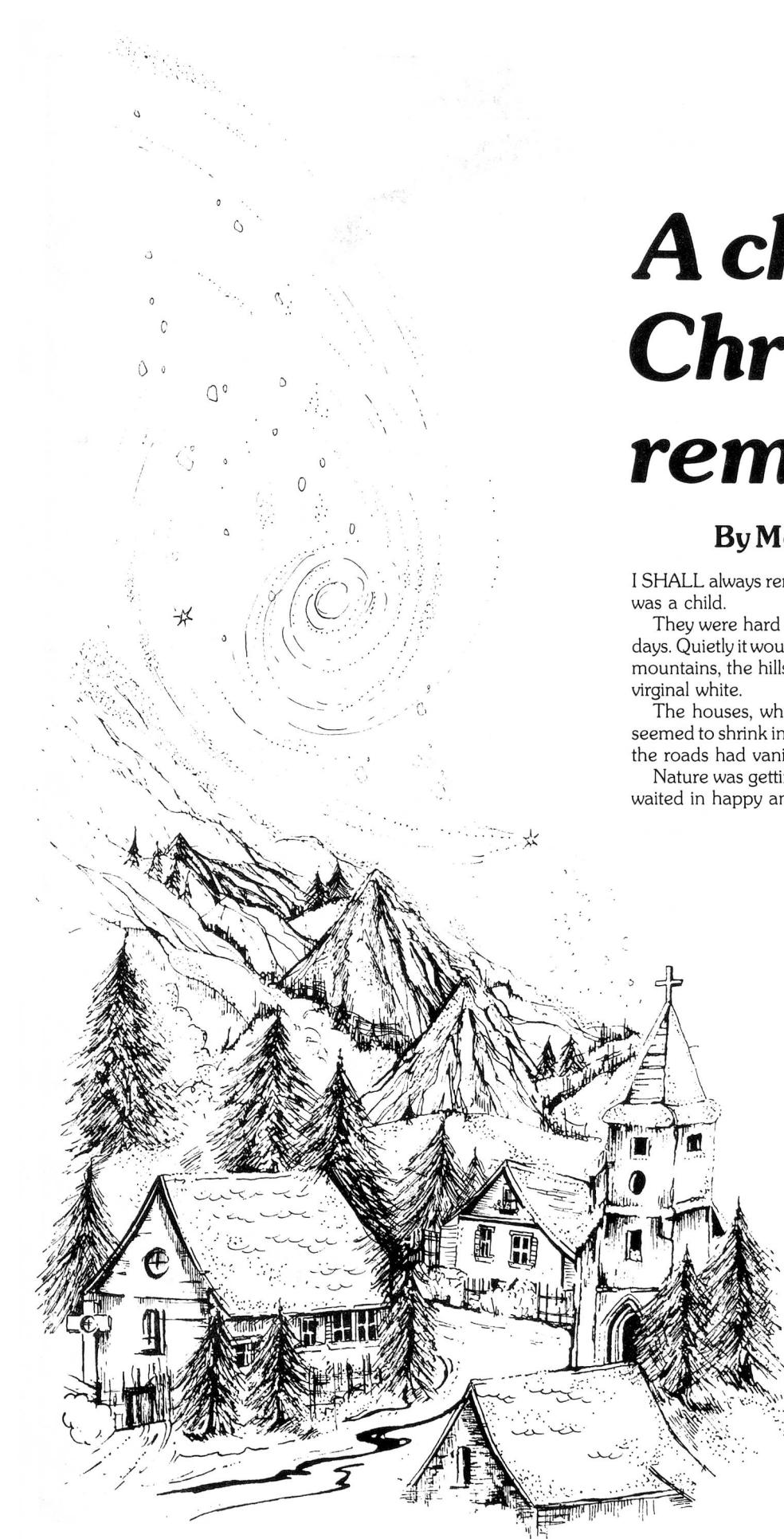
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A childhood Christmas remembered

By Monika Brewster-Villiger

I SHALL always remember the magic and mystery of Christmas when I was a child.

They were hard winters in the Swiss mountains. Snow would fall for days. Quietly it would come down from heavy low skies. It would clad the mountains, the hills, the forests and the village in layers upon layers of virginal white.

The houses, which creaked and sighed under their heavy burden, seemed to shrink in the backdrops of the mountains. The poles marking the roads had vanished in the mounting snowdrifts.

Nature was getting ready for Christmas. Christmas for which we had waited in happy anticipation for the last few weeks.

In Switzerland it is Christmas Eve which holds the mystery and suspense. By Swiss tradition, it is then when the Christkind comes down to earth from heaven and rewards all good children.

In England, our mother had told us, Father Christmas brought the presents, she told us about the old white bearded man who climbed down the chimneys in the middle of the night filling stockings with gifts opened by the children early on Christmas morning.

We knew that Father Christmas could not be in England and Switzerland at the same time and that we didn't have fireplaces. Anybody attempting to climb down our chimney would burn in the big tiled stove.

Therefore the Christkind itself with the tree and presents tiptoed in and out of our houses leaving only a few traces of angelhair and tinsel.

The Christkind was so shy, we never caught the slightest glimpse of it. Mother had warned us that it would not come to children who

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could not keep quiet or tried to peep.

So we duly kept out of the way and just like every year we carried our skis up to the waterfall, a long and exhausting climb, rewarded by a breathtaking sight. For at this time of year the gushing waters had frozen to gigantic organpipes, the snowcovered fir trees and the sheer cliffs forming a perfect dome.

This was our secret place, we called it our Christmas cathedral.

Dusk was falling, the grey skies seemed to enwrap us, it was still snowing. It was time to go home.

We struggled into our skis – in those days not an easy task because the rusty bindings would freeze up in no time and the string which held them together would usually break just on take off.

Fine powdered snow blew in our faces, into our eyes and mouth as we raced down the inclines. The church bell was striking a snow muffled four o'clock. Hurry, hurry, hurry, hurry, it seemed to say. What excitement would await us when we reached home.

By the time we arrived home our skis were frozen to our boots, we looked just like two snowmen. Shaking, clapping and stamping we climbed up the stairs. The house was filled with the sweet aroma of ginger, cinnamon, oranges and burning logs.

A tinkling sound of a bell. The door of the lounge ajar – it had

been bolted for days and strange and bustling noises had been heard from within.

Mother was saying the magical words: "It has been, the Christkind, come and see". To us she was an angel who opened the sealed gates of heaven. My sister and I eagerly entered it.

And there it was, the firtree decorated like something out of a fairytale. The candles flickering and reflected a hundredfold in the colourful glass balls.

Under the tree was a wooden stable, baby Jesus on a pile of hay amidst sheep, small sheep, large sheep, black sheep, white sheep, ugly and handsome sheep, hundreds of them.

They were our pets, and once a year they were taken out of their tissue wrappings. Some belonged to my sister, some of them were mine and every year there was one new sheep, which was usually spotted straight away.

One of the sheep seemed to sleep through every Christmas. I could never understand how that lazy sheep could sleep in such a glorious night.

The horrible black sheep was there again, like every Christmas, its head turned away as if it wasn't interested. And there was my favourite sheep, the one which lost a leg when I had dropped it.

A quick glance under the table showed where the parcels were hidden. They were wrapped in shiny paper decorated with ribbons and bows, each a work of art.

I knew there was a brown parcel

for me, because it had been delivered only this morning. My dear godfather. He always sent me the most fascinating gifts, like crying dolls, dancing bears.

Once he sent a glass ball with a snowcovered landscape in which by a mere shaking one could conjure up a real snowstorm, as if we didn't have enough snow.

My mother thought them to be impractical gifts; to me they were luxuriously beautiful. So were the two big parcels which had been sent again by an organisation who helps people in the mountains.

They would contain a bounty of goods, exotic food, toys and books and strange clothes, strange to us because they were quite different from the dark, heavy duty dresses.

The same organisation also supplied all the children in the village with second hand skis and boots, because for most of us the way to school was arduous and skis made life so much easier.

My mother felt guilty accepting parcels. After all we had chosen this solitary life in the mountains and we were not poor. She wrote to explain, but the parcels kept on arriving without fail every Christmas, and I remember them as part of the magic of my childhood.

Then we sang Christmas carols and said our own Christmas poems, rehearsed for weeks. We said prayers that seemed never ending, for the living and the dead, those who had gone before us, as my mother called them, for my father, grandfather uncles and

aunts.

During all this we stole hidden glances at the parcels. We knew we shouldn't look, after all Christmas was not just for presents, but for celebrating the arrival of Christ.

The moment came at last after one more reminder not to tear open the parcels – the paper had to be used again. Carefully we unwrapped our treasures, screaming with happiness and delight, and just like every Christmas we declared that never before had we received so many presents.

That was the time of perfect contentment. The time of playing with our new toys, reading books and trying on our new clothes.

At midnight, tired but happy, we walked through the crisp snow to the small church. The clouds had lifted, it had stopped snowing and a few stars were in the sky.

Everything was quiet, only the faint crackling peacefulness of a winter's night. We met the whole village, with lanterns and torches, as they stepped out of the frozen darkness.

From the snow-blanketed church the bells rang out into that wonderful Christmas night when I was a child and the air was filled with singing voices:

Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht,
alles schlaeft, einsam wacht
nur das traute, hochheilige Paar,
holder Knabe im lockigen Haar,
schlaf in himmlischer Ruh,
schlaf in himmlischer Ruh.

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