



THE
HERALD ANGEL

A Winter Ghost Tale

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The Herald Angel
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A Short Story

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Christmas Eve, 1944

Candlelight illuminated the medieval wall paintings and above the altar the ancient gold stars shone from the midnight-blue domed ceiling. Joyce immersed herself in the poignant harmony of the prisoner-of-war choir as the men sang *Stille Nacht*, their voices weaving descant and tenor counterpoints of joy. When the last strains of the ancient carol echoed from the stone walls of St. Mary's Church, her gaze was drawn, as always, to the statue in the shadows. Tonight, with the candles lit to usher in Christmas Eve, the stone cavalier shone golden, his handsome features distinct as she had never seen before.

The flames shimmered as tears filled her eyes, whether from the beauty of the singing or the loneliness in her heart, she knew not. Christmas Eve, and her family clear across the other side of England, with no hope of a 24 hour leave pass to see them. And yet, there was a reason for her to stay. The young German officer in Field Hospital 302 was still in the ferocious grip of a fever, and her nursing experience told her that if it did not break soon, his life was in danger. He had scarce spoken since he had been brought into the prisoner-of-war camp in late November, and in early December, when the handsome surgeon she had thought herself in love with returned to his wife in New York, her vigil at Captain Erich Hoffman's bedside was one that helped pass her sleepless nights.

She pushed her pale blonde hair back under her nurse's hood, and gathered her warm navy cloak around her. Soon it would be midnight, and her shift would begin. These few moments of peace would be all she had to sustain her through the darkest hours of Christmas morning.

Captain Edward St. John slipped into Hut 9, as he did every night, and when the ward sister lifted her head from her notes, he paused. She walked briskly to the narrow door and tugged the blackout curtains shut. Edward smiled. Sister may think that the freezing December weather caused the sudden cold draft, but he knew better.

He looked around the ward; no new arrivals tonight, thanks be to God.

He had watched the strangers build the hospital on the grounds of Lydiard Park in July, and when the wounded German prisoners started arriving after D-Day, Edward found himself compelled to spend the nights walking the crowded wards, bringing comfort to those delirious with pain and fearful of death. He recalled his last Christmas at Lydiard, when his own battle wounds drew a veil over his sight and a coldness descended upon him that could never be warmed. Did he know even then that this would be his last? Perhaps his father did, for he never left his side, and when the spring came and his dearest Luce arrived, Edward knew in his heart that he would not live beyond Easter.

And so, each night, he walked between the beds of the sick and dying, speaking to the men as only one soldier could to another. In truth, he had not seen such wounds as these, for there were little from the sword and many from a musket and trauma, but despite the care of the surgeons the men were still so vulnerable. And, if there was a way to help these nurses, who reminded him so much of Luce and his Aunt Lucy Apsley, he would do so. Their soft voices and courage in dressing the terrible wounds of their own injured soldiers brought back such memories. To some of these men he could bring immediate comfort, but others would not accept that death waited, and that he heralded their own mortality.

This young soldier in bed seven. Dear God, how much he reminded him of his cousin Allen, his handsome features now contorted with pain. He was next, Edward thought. The least he could do was to ease his path and honour his bravery by walking with him.

“Erich,” he whispered. “Erich, you may let go. There is peace at hand, and your pain will be over.”

The young German officer groaned, and shook his head. His dark hair flopped over his brow, and Edward gently pushed it back from his damp forehead.

“Mein engel,” the man called. “Wo ist sie?”

“Come with me,” Edward said. “I will take you home now, Erich.”

“Nein. Nein.” Erich’s eyes fluttered open, charcoal gray in the dim light of the hut. “Please. My angel. Bring her.”

Edward knew only too well how a last glimpse of those loved ones was all that a man desired in his last hours. And how that wish had been denied him in his own journey.

“Wait, then,” replied Edward. He glanced around the ward. Sister was at her desk, her back to him. Drawing the blanket around Erich, he nodded, and slipped through the door again. If he could delay Erich’s departure so he could say goodbye to the nurse, he would. But there was little time.

In St. Mary’s church, Joyce replaced the worn hymn book on the wooden shelf in front of her, and gathered up her bible. And as she nodded her head to the stone cavalier, wishing him a peaceful Christmas as he stood in his golden armor in his Civil War tent, her eye was caught by a man sitting at the end of her pew. She blinked, for she had not seen him arrive, and surely he was not there but a moment ago. As the choir sang the first verse of *Hark the Herald Angels Sing* the man turned to her and she found herself looking into piercing blue eyes and a familiar handsome countenance that she could not quite place. He was muffled in a great cloak, old-fashioned in its cut. His hair was long, pulled back by a ribbon, so unusual for these days.

“Nurse Mayfield?” he asked softly, urgently, under the rising chorus of the choir.

“Yes,” she replied. “How did you know my name?”

The man smiled, and reached out a hand to her. His glove was thick leather, and had a wide cuff. She glimpsed an edge of lace beneath.

“Please, I would ask you to accompany me.” He caught the reluctance in her. “You are quite safe. I just want to escort you across the park to the hospital. Sister sent me, on an urgent mission.”

“Captain Hoffman---”

He nodded, his face grave. "Yes."

Joyce stood, and hurried from the church, aware of the eyes of the rest of the parish upon her, but not really caring what they thought.

Stepping out from the ancient oak doors, she followed the man, whose cloak fell almost to the ground. Where it fell just short, she noticed he was wearing riding boots, not a uniform.

He lifted his head as the strains of *Hark the Herald Angels Sing* echoed from within the church.

"My favourite hymn," he said quietly. "I heard it first, here at Lydiard."

"Mine too," she replied. At her words, a single flake of snow drifted down into the pool of light from the church porch, and she trembled as the man pulled her hood over her head to protect her from the winter weather.

From the church he swiftly led her across the gravel to the stable block, and then around the front of the old mansion. The darkness enveloped them, and he picked up a lantern left on the doorstep of the deserted house. Its tremulous flame threw a glow around them, and for a moment she thought she saw candlelight within the rooms beyond the darkness. She shook her head, for it could only be her imagination, the house was long empty of the last of the St. John family.

Across the park the man strode, confident in his path, as if he had walked this many times before. Soon, they arrived at the guardhouse to the camp, and as Joyce approached, she waved at Joe, the guard on duty to night. He raised his mug of tea to her and waved her through.

"Goodnight Miss Joyce," he called. "Merry Christmas!"

"Goodnight Joe," she replied. "And please allow my..." she turned, but the man was no longer by her side. Puzzled, she looked around, and saw him already across the field, standing by the entrance to Hut 9.

"Go on with you." Joe had already turned back to his warm guard post. "And hurry, before the snow falls thicker."

Inside the hut Joyce quickly removed her cloak, shaking the last of the snowflakes from the dark blue wool. Sister nodded at her, and gestured to the corner.

“Captain Hoffman is very weak,” she said shortly. “You’d best stay with him. Moira can take the other beds tonight.”

Joyce walked to the Captain’s bedside, still wondering where the man was who had guided her from the church. In the dim light, Erich’s pale face gleamed, shadows blue under his closed eyes. The shadow of his beard enhanced his firm jaw, and with sorrow she reflected she might not touch his face again to shave and bathe him. As she turned the lamp low, she opened the blackout curtain, revealing a crack of window. Against the darkness, a whirl of snowflakes kissed the glass, and the Captain turned his face towards them.

“Home,” he murmured. “The snow falls so in Bavaria.”

She could not speak for the sadness in her throat, and taking his hand, she sat with him as the snow drifted by the window, and his hand grew slack in hers.

She must have dozed, for the next she knew, the pale light of dawn was edging through the window, and within minutes the first rays of the rising sun pierced the morning. Joyce gasped, for Erich lay still. She closed her eyes to stop her tears from falling, whispering a farewell blessing.

A gradual wellbeing warmed her, and when the light brought a golden glow to her closed lids, she opened her eyes to find Erich gazing at her, his own eyes clear and a smile on his lips.

“Mein engel,” he whispered. “You came to me when I needed you most.”

She could not speak for the joy that leaped into her heart. His eyes were a translucent gray, unclouded, and full of love for her. Erich’s fever had broken.

Glancing through the window across the sparkling snow to the woodland that led to the mansion, she glimpsed a shadow in the bare trees. A man in a long cloak, booted, his hair tied back with a ribbon. He lifted a hand and then walked into the woods, leaving no trace in the fresh snow.

She turned back to Erich.

“Yes,” she said. “I am here. And you are going to be well. Happy Christmas, Erich.”

“Happy Christmas, mein engel.”

Author’s Note:

American Field Hospital 302 was built on the grounds of Lydiard Park, and in 1944, it was turned into a prisoner-of-war hospital for German soldiers injured after D-Day. Captain Edward St. John, “The Golden Cavalier” in St. Mary’s Church, Lydiard, sustained mortal wounds at the Battle of Newbury, and died at Lydiard in 1644. *Hark the Herald Angels Sing* was first noted as a Christmas hymn in the mid-1600s. December 1944 was a particularly cold month, and the first white Christmas at Lydiard for many years.