

WINSTON, N.C., 1909—
Soon Christmas came. Helen thought about the candles that would be in church and the big tree that would be in her family's parlor.

Late in the afternoon on Christmas Eve, time came for the children's Christmas service at the Moravian Church down the street. Helen held Libby's and Moddy's mittened hands, while Mother held Jack on her hip. Just the five of them were going. The older children had cut a tree and were secretly preparing it behind the closed parlor doors.

As the younger Sharp children were leaving the house, Mother stopped on the porch and turned to Helen. "Will you run inside and get the linen napkins that I laid on the table?" With a smile, she reminded them, "You know we'll need them when we are served buns and coffee at the service."

Of course, Helen knew about the buns and coffee. She especially loved that part of the service and the candles. She also knew that Mother wanted her children to spread their best napkins on their laps.

Inside the church, the room was filled with the smell of coffee, the sound of the choir and the light from the many candles. Helen, too, was filled with the wonder of it all and the mystery of what



Moravian candle, coffee cup and bun

she might find at her own house.

Afterwards, as they picked their way home over the icy patches on the road, they could still hear the church band playing Christmas carols. The girls joined in and sang to each other, "Joy to the world....."

Helen thought Christmas morning would never come.

Eating supper was hard but sleeping was even harder. The piano was strange to hear at bedtime, but there it was, "Joy to the world....."

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Realizing that night had passed, and Christmas morning had arrived, Helen jumped out of bed. The other girls sprang up with her and ran, tripping over nightgowns, to get down the stairs to the front hall. Alan was playing the piano in the

parlor, and Papa was standing in the hallway with his back to the closed parlor doors. He was smiling and waiting to show the surprise to all the little ones. He swung open the doors to show a beautiful tree decorated with tiny candles and colored glass ornaments.

Mother had to hold tight to Jack to keep him from squirming out of her arms, but Moddy and Libby ran closer to look at the tree and the little town that was built in a box under the bottom branches.

"See how the candle is the star over the stable," Helen said as she touched the limb that hung lowest to the floor. A tin candle holder was clipped on the green needles, and in it was a small candle. "See how the light shines on the baby in the manger."

"Look," Libby cried, as she pointed under the branch. Libby saw them first, then Moddy, then Helen. Just beyond where they were crouched were three dolls placed under the tree. They had sweet faces with painted eyes and little curls that showed from under their crocheted caps. As the girls reached for them, Moddy stumbled against Jack who was climbing onto his new rocking horse. She fell into the tree, tipping one of the candles from its holder. In an instant, the tiny twinkle grew into a blaze.

Helen heard the crackle, and turned toward the sound. She saw the flame lick up a branch of the cedar. She held her doll to the scar that crossed her stomach, but she could not move. She stood thinking how a little flame looked like a star when it was safe on the end of a candle. A flame safe in the cook stove could bake bread and warm the kitchen. But a fire out of its place struck fear deep inside of her.

While she stood fixed to the floor, the others reacted. Alan swung around from

his place at the piano. "Get some water!" he called as he moved toward the bucket placed near the parlor stove. He threw water on the flames while Harry and Papa steadied the tree and snuffed out the remaining candles.

When it was over, Papa praised his older sons, "Harry, Alan," he turned to each of them. "You acted so quickly that the tree was saved and we didn't have to carry it outside. You kept the fire from ruining our day."

In the quiet that followed, he smiled at Mother and the younger children and gave Helen a special pat. He must have sensed her thoughts; he sat next to her and talked of other things.

The rest of Christmas Day was full of such happiness that the thought of the fire faded. The children received gifts of candy sticks and delicious golden raisins still attached to the stems where they grew. They were given nuts to crack and precious oranges to peel and savor. Helen was glad that the Sharps took a gift box with many of the same things to

Ruthie and her family.

The family shared a wonderful book. It gave instructions for making all sorts of gadgets. With its help and their imagination they could turn bits of cloth, thread and paper into countless hours of fun.

Alan received the best gift. "Look at this!" he exclaimed as he opened his package, "a box Brownie camera!" The Sharps put on their coats and posed on the front porch for a family picture. Their cousin Richard took the snapshot. The boys were clowning. Harry held Jack, the girls held their dolls, and Mabel held the hand of the man she planned to marry in the spring.

next chapter—Papa suffers accident

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ACTIVITY: Pretend you're Helen writing a letter to a friend or family member about her family's Christmas celebration. Explain Helen's experiences, her thoughts and feelings. Also, write a letter, blog or email in which you describe a favorite holiday celebration.

HISTORY: Moravians celebrate a "love-feast" on Christmas Eve. The service promotes unity and fellowship. Congregants sing, share food and drink, light candles and receive a blessing.