

—GETTING ONE'S HALLS DECKED—

by Professor Roosevelt Fitzgerald



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When you live in a house where there are spaces between the wall boards and the floor boards and where there is a corrugated tin roof with no tar where the nails were and there were leaks each time it rained and it rained, seemingly, all the time and your only source of water came from an outside hydrant with exposed pipes which burst every year during normal winter conditions and there was no inside facilities and whenever nature called, one had to go into the wilds and when you did not have a washing machine nor dryer and all such enterprises took place in a number three tub and on a clothesline where hanging clothing froze solid even on nice days in December, January, February and on into March, well, you just did not dream of white Christmases.

Where I came from, Natchez, Mississippi, Christmas time was a freezing time and I only remember seeing something called snow just once before leaving there. It did not stick around — no pun intended — and I do not know if it was an exclusive result of prevailing weather conditions or if it was against some city, county or state ordinance. You see, back in those days, there were jim crow laws which forbade the mixing of black and white and, quite possibly, due to the fact that snow was white and white southern scientists and other technologists with mental capacities "superior" to those of their black brethren, had not, at that point, discovered a means of making some of the snow — that which would fall where black people lived — black, the authorities did not allow any snow to fall and thereby headed off any possibility of any form of integration of white and black.

No. I did not dream of white Christmases. When I would go to bed I would be underneath six or eight quilts and in between my two older brothers (we slept three in a bed), and praying that during the night I would not have a need to go to the toilet. In the winter time, I never drank any fluids after four in the evening. I also prayed that the chimney would not catch fire and burn the house, my family and me up with it. I prayed that the pipes would not burst and require our going out and turning the water off and slipping and sliding in mud

that was freezing even as we sloshed around in it. I just prayed to get through the night without any terrible events taking place which would cause me to come down with a cold or the flu or the whooping cough or the croups (I don't know if that word is spelled correctly or not and I don't feel like looking it up).

During the day, one of the few ways of keeping warm was to go outside and cut wood all day and that is what I did — I cut wood, stacked it on the back porch near the back door, stacked it under the house where it wouldn't get wet, stacked it on the front porch up to the ceiling and gathered mounds of kindling (starter wood). It was rough in those days but you just got out there and you did the best you could in order to survive. That kind of survival could not be achieved without inspiration and whenever I approached the point of just laying down and dying, I would go to the door or a window and gaze at my mother who never once faltered, who never grew despondent, who never asked for relief and was never broken by the forces of nature or the forces of racism.

"O Little Town of Bethlehem" has great significance for me. Always has. I remember, as a child, hearing about Mary and Joseph of Nazareth traveling to Bethlehem and upon their arrival, even though Mary was with Child and that birth was imminent, they could not get a room at any of the inns in that city. Imagine, if it's never happened to you, being on the road, in a strange city and not being able to find a roof or anything and the best you could do, for your wife and child, that's on the way, is a stable with different animals and such and you find a spider that is more humane than the humans you've encountered. Many times, in the ole days and sometimes even nowadays, I've been on the road going from one place to another and have pulled up in front of an inn which showed a vacancy sign only to be turned away upon entering with the age-old lines of: "Somebody must have forgotten to turn the vacancy sign off" or "we just rented our last room" and, more often than not, there would be hardly no lights on in any of the units and only two or three cars in the parking lot.

I know exactly how Mary and Joseph felt in Bethlehem. I've felt that way in Miami, L.A., Twin Falls, Idaho, Coral Gables, Forth Worth, Dallas, San Antone and Houston, Nashville, Atlanta, New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Evansville and Indianapolis, Reno and Las Vegas and even "holy" Toledo, Ohio. I've been kept out of better inns than those they had in Bethlehem almost two thousand years ago. Somewhere, in those light recesses of my mind, I've often wondered if I might not be another Jesus — Lord in Heaven knows I've done as much suffering. We all have.

I remember the Christmas of 1957 when my uncle Louis' house was bombed while he and my aunt were still in bed. I had two uncles named Louis. One was my mother's brother and the other was my aunt's husband. You can figure that out. The bombing took place at my mother's brother's house. It "Came Upon A Midnight Clear." I remember the women crying and the men standing guard all night with their shotguns. My uncle hadn't done anything except tell the man he worked for that he wouldn't be able to work at a party on Christmas eve night because he was going to church. The man hadn't liked that, called my uncle uppity, fired him and said, "you'll be sorry you black bastard." Well, he was. Seems that everybody knew who did it but the authorities did nothing about it. My uncle, who was already crazy, went insane after that episode.

The fact that my uncle had done nothing is indeed significant. It is to day or to ask: "What deed by anyone would warrant their having their home blown up with the intention of blowing them up also?" Someone once said that there is never a justifiable reason for mur-

der. Maybe that is true in some places and with some people but it was not true in Natchez with my uncle Louis on Christmas eve 1957.

There were many people who were so afraid of dying that they never got around to living. Anybody who had trouble with nightriders or klansmen, automatically were ostracized by such people. Those attacked learned to stand by themselves. They learned that one cannot really count on strangers no matter how well you know them. Those who stand in such a manner are prepared to go through the

wall of pain all the way to "the wall."

Those were rough times and they were hard times. We didn't have Christmas trees and we rarely got Christmas presents. An uncle or a cousin or an aunt or a grandfather or some such as that might give a child a quarter or a dime or something. Parents might give as much as a dollar but rarely more than that. The more commercialized the day became the worse some people felt because it meant there was more that they couldn't have. We would go window shopping and look at all the things there were to be had but not by us. We'd sing a lot of those songs and roast peanuts or sweet potatoes in the fireplace and as Christmas neared, people would visit much more than usual and sit around the largest fireplace and eat those items and tell stories and remind each other of how things had been back in the 1890s, 1910s, 1920s, 1930s and so on.

"Put another piece of wood on the fire."

"I got four squirrels and a possum today."

"Y'all goin' have a big Christmas huh?"

"Hey Elmo, c'mon and sing some of them songs for us."

"Which one you want to hear?"

"What about Silent Night?"

"Let's all sing that one."

"Ok."

We'd sing the song and sit and look at the fire. I'll never forget the expression I would see on my mother's face. You know how it is — it seemed almost to say: "Another year and I'm not able to give my children anything for Christmas." But she had. She gave us backbone, character, guts, resiliency and a recognition that all glory is fleeting.



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