



BACK IN TIME

by Tony Beckwith
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WHEN A TREAT BECAME A TRADITION

A couple of years after we moved to Montevideo my mother was stricken with a severe case of homesickness. It was early December and she pined for the sort of family Christmas she had known while she was growing up. My father, who was at his wit's end trying to decide what to give her for Christmas, recognized a perfect solution when he saw one, and we were soon on our way to Buenos Aires to spend the holidays with her parents.

My maternal grandparents lived in a large house in Coghlan, a leafy suburb where many British families had settled over the years. It was a fine old place, only slightly the worse for wear, with a bright, spacious living room and dining room on the ground floor and several bedrooms upstairs. The kitchen was down a dark hallway that led off the dining room, with French doors that opened onto a back patio. It was a huge, cavernous room, like the kitchens I had seen at estancias in the camp, with an enormous wood-burning stove that must have been hauled in when the house was built, many years ago. There was also a modern gas stove that my grandfather had had installed for doing the daily cooking. But when the house was full of guests, as it usually was on Christmas day, my grandmother fired up the old range where she could cook a variety of things all at

once, some in the twin ovens down below and some on the burners on the top. She was a terrific cook, the kind who never used a recipe, just added a pinch of this and a dash of that, tasting each item until she



was satisfied, flitting about the kitchen to make sure that everything was just right, ably assisted on this occasion by her two daughters and a maid. Wearing an embroidered white apron over her party dress, she was obviously enjoying herself, occasionally doing little dance steps in time to the music that could be heard filtering in from the living room.

While Grannie and her crew were producing lunch for the score or so guests, Grandpa was entertaining them, ably assisted by his son, my uncle David. My grandfather was a marvellous musician; he had never had a lesson in his life but could play anything that anyone could hum or whistle. While David replenished drinks and bowls of peanuts and potato chips, Grandpa played the piano, encouraging everyone to sing along to the popular songs he had learned as a young man growing up in Yorkshire, back in the old country. He sang a few Christmas carols, but mainly played oldies like *Knees Up Mother Brown*. Paying tribute to Glenn Miller's greatest hits, he called out,





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“Pardon me, boy, is that the Chattanooga Choo-Choo?” From across the room David replied: “Track 29!” and Grandpa sang: “Boy, you can give me a shine.” The assembled friends and family were delighted.

At some point David poured a “Gin & It”—Grannie’s favourite cocktail: two parts gin, one part sweet vermouth—and ran it back to the kitchen. “Thank you, dear!” said Grannie, as she brandished a long wooden spoon in one hand and a cigarette in the other. It was the cigarette that particularly fascinated my brother and me. Much as we wanted to be in the living room watching Grandpa do his routine, we just couldn’t tear ourselves away when Grannie put her cigarette in the corner of her mouth, squinting through the smoke as she stirred one saucepan after another. The ash got longer, and longer, and longer, and finally crumbled and fell into one of the pans. She didn’t seem to notice, or maybe she thought it added something to the flavour. My brother and I strained to see exactly where the ash landed, and made a mental note to avoid the carrots, or potatoes, or whatever it had fallen into.

of the party. My mother and father joined my brother and me at one of the smaller tables so that we could all be together for the occasion. “Isn’t this fun!” said my mother, looking flushed and happy. She had thoroughly enjoyed working with her mother and sister in the kitchen again after being absent for a few years. Grandpa carved the turkey while David sliced the roast beef, and there was a flurry of activity as vegetables, Yorkshire pudding, gravy, and bread rolls were passed from one person to another. Everyone raised a glass and said “Merry Christmas” and then tucked into the meal. The food was, as always, first class and people were soon murmuring “delicious” and offering “compliments to the chef.”

As we started eating, my mother inspected our plates and noticed that neither my brother nor I had taken any carrots. “What’s the matter,” she asked, “I thought you liked Grannie’s carrots?” Not knowing quite what to say, we both just looked down at our plates, and were hugely relieved when my father said, “I’d forgotten what a good time we always have with your parents. We should do this every year.” And just like that, a family tradition was born.



Lunch was finally served at about three o’clock in the afternoon. There was a long table in the dining room where most of the adults were seated, and a couple of bridge tables in the living room for the rest

Christmas Poem

Dear Father Christmas
 do you remember me?
 May I ask for just one gift
 to put beneath my tree?

Would you bring some
 peace on Earth?
 I’m tired of all the wars
 Many thanks and lots of love
 to you and Mrs. Claus