



Christmas  
on the  
Rhine

By » »  
W. B. HOGG

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**W. B. HOGG**

*Chaplain in the World War*



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## God's Christmas Gift

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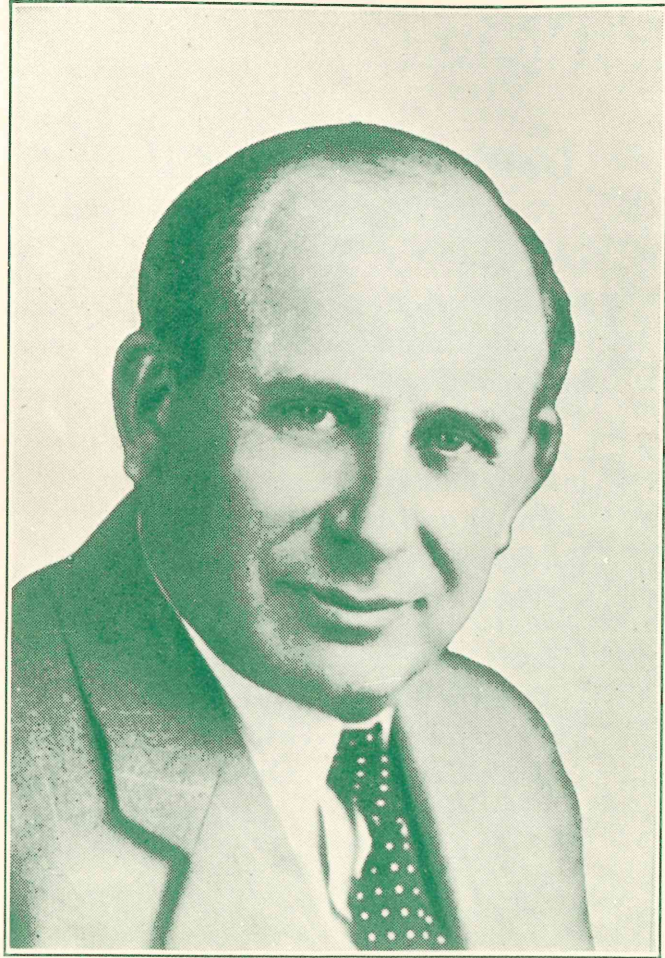
**I**N lowly birth He came to earth,  
God's Christmas Gift of love;  
Men turned away, nor bade Him stay,  
The Saviour from above.

In lowly birth He came to earth,  
The Heir of Heaven's throne;  
But now He's mine, this King divine,  
And I am His alone.

In lowly birth He came to earth,  
Your Christmas Gift to be;  
Oh, turn from sin and let Him in,  
God's Gift through Calvary.

—Oswald J. Smith.





REV. W. B. HOGG

## Christmas on the Rhine

**O**FTEN have I spent delightful hours in antique shops looking at the quaint odds and ends of other days. It was not my privilege to purchase any of the articles, but I took great delight in following more fortunate visitors and watching them purchase the quaint pieces of furniture, suits of armour, and kitchen-ware that told by a thousand dents and scratches the story of flying years. But it makes my heart glad to know that there is a kindly old shop-keeper who never closes his doors, and who gives to all who come whatever they choose from his exhaustless store. His name is *Memory*. It is he who preserves for us the priceless things that the years would take away from us for ever.

*Memory* has done for us a wonderful kindness in keeping the recollections of Christmas safely stored away where our hearts can go ever and anon to revel in the treasures. It is our good fortune to take away to the storehouse of our heart all these precious things. What a boon to those who have lived to the riper years. No longer do they hear the laughter of happy children about the Christmas tree. The leaves have been taken from the old dining table, and mother and father sit alone for the Christmas meal. It is blessed then to walk through the treasures of the heart and hear again the shouts of childish glee, and see again the blessed faces of those who once made the Christmas circle so happy and complete.

No one ever thinks of Christmas apart from Christmas Eve—that blessed night before with its last-minute shopping, the preparation of the Christmas tree, and a score of other thrilling memories of the happy, holy season. And this brings me to my story, the story of my one and only Christmas on the Rhine.

That Christmas on the Rhine stands out because of the heart-gripping tragedy associated with it, and the memories of war-blasted days. A few days before a messenger had handed me a cablegram that froze my heart. It was like a steel bullet—small and swift, but straight through my breast:

“Hogg—Headquarters Third Army—  
CHILD DIED TODAY. WIRE AVAIL-  
ABLE FUNDS. BROKEN-HEARTED.  
WIFE.”

Only twelve words! How often I counted them! I tried to read into them all that my wife would have said had she been given the opportunity. Was it my son? Was it one of the four little girls? God, the suspense and horror of it all!

Every cent was spent in cablegrams, none of which ever reached my wife. Two hundred dollars came providentially; I cabled it to my wife through a welfare organization. We received it three years after my return to the United States. The money transfer was found beneath a drawer in the central headquarters of the organization in Paris when they were cleaning out the offices long after the war was over.

No answer ever came to me in Germany on the Rhine. That Christmas night found me like a mad man walking the streets with that little piece of paper and its twelve fatal words next to my heart. The windows of the shops were filled with toys, dolls, drums, tiny Christmas trees and a thousand things to tear my heart like shrapnel. Every little bit of holiday suggestion made my heart-wound to bleed afresh. “Which one of the babies is gone?” I whispered over and over again. I wondered if my wife had bought toys only for the little girls, or if she had bought one doll less for Christmas! Then a freezing wind seemed to blow through my soul as I feared that perhaps the money was all gone, and there were no toys at my home!

Disconsolate, broken-hearted, I carried on. My particular duty was to cheer up the three hundred thousand men that made up the Army of American Occupation. It was dreadfully hard during those pre-Christmas days to brighten up the dull, drab lives of homesick soldiers and carry such a wound in my heart. Often when I faced a group of yelling doughboys, a chorus of stentorian voices would yell, “Tell us a funny story!” None of them ever dreamed how my heart ached as I tried to entertain them. The meetings always closed with a religious service that gave me some relief—the losing of myself in a Christian message.

\* \* \* \* \*

As I left the Y.M.C.A. hall the night before Christmas, after the meeting, I wandered down

Kaiser-strasse watching the shoppers and thinking of home. Suddenly someone yelled:

"Hello, Chaplain Hogg!"

It was Lt. Dahmer, director of the band in my old outfit at Camp Pike, Arkansas! "What a little world this is after all" swept through my mind as I greeted Dahmer and several of the boys from the old 312th Engineers of the 87th Division. My first military service as a chaplain was with these boys away back in the camp near Little Rock, Ark. We talked over old times—those blessed days when the 312th was not allowed an official band, and I had musicians inducted into service and rated as engineers to create a band. How they laughed at the thought of my having been the **BAND DIRECTOR!** Lt. Dahmer had been brought to us when our little band of fifteen instruments had been made official. When I became Chaplain of the division, I lost track of the 312th and the band. Soon after the arrival in France, I had been taken away from the 87th division and was attached to General Pershing's Headquarters in Chaumont, France. Imagine my delightful surprise when Dahmer told me his band had won in a competition, and were now assigned to Coblenz.

Before I could tell the boys of the sad news I had received from home, one of them said:

"Chaplain, do you remember what great times we used to have in Little Rock when we would all go into the city and serenade your wife and the kiddies? How your little children did enjoy those concerts in the front

yard at 704 Wolfe Street. And what good ice cream your wife served!"

Somehow I told them. Lt. Dahmer read the message over and over again. He passed it around among the boys. There was nothing they could say. One by one they snapped into "attention"—saluted me and said "Goodnight"! I watched them through tears as they disappeared.

\* \* \* \* \*

A light snow was falling as I turned towards my hotel room in Coblenz that Christmas Eve night. My heart went out in a rush of tenderness to the little German children that laughed in glee at the pretty toys and in anticipation of the Christmas joys that the morrow would bring. It was difficult to keep from envying the parents to whose hands those happy children clung that night. Some of the parents were ex-soldiers too, men who only a few weeks before had faced us in the trenches just across No Man's Land. Men still wearing their German uniforms limped by brightly lighted shops, happy to be home again. It was strange that the bitterness of the war was gone. Deep down in my heart, I wanted to take them by the hand and rejoice with them that it was all over, and that we could pass each other once again in peace.

In my sorrow and loneliness, I turned into a park that lay along the swiftly flowing Rhine river. I slumped into a bench beneath one of the park lights. As I sat there thinking of my home in Little Rock,

Arkansas—three thousand miles away, I heard a gurgle of silvery laughter. My heart leaped as I looked up to see a pretty, blue-eyed little German girl standing only a few feet away. I rubbed my hands across my eyes to be sure it was not a dream. But this little girl was flesh and blood and laughter! Looking straight at me she laughed again, and ran back to where I now saw a man and woman standing and watching the child with embarrassment. The man wore a faded grey uniform and leaned heavily on a cane. He came up to apologize for the child's conduct. He said in very broken English that he had told the little girl that the American soldier would "get her" if she wasn't good. And that his little girl had run up to me to show that she was not afraid. I immediately assured him that his baby was correct, and that I had children of my own away back in the U.S.A. I also told him that the reason I sat alone in the park was that my heart was broken. He told me of his sympathy in a mixture of German and English, then hobbled away.

In a moment, one of the military police came up to warn me of our general orders forbidding any fraternizing with the Germans. He told me that if I was not more careful, I would find myself in trouble. Something akin to resentment stirred within me. I felt that in my sorrow I had the right to warm my heart in the sunshine of a child's smile.

Perhaps an hour had passed, and I was about to go to my room in Hotel Traube, when I noticed the little girl and her parents coming back my way. They had

made a few purchases for their Christmas celebration. Before I could check myself I said, "Merry Christmas to you". They came up to me again and returned my greetings in German. The man whispered something to his wife, and she and the little girl moved off a bit. Then this German soldier said softly: "Come mit me mine house dis night—you see der odder kinder—funf kinder iss at mine house." I struggled with my heart a moment, then whispered, "You wait here a few minutes."

Sugar was priceless in Germany that Christmas, and candy was worth its weight in gold. I remembered that I had five pounds of sugar and a pound of chocolate candy in my room. The sugar had been issued me for my personal use because none of the restaurants served sugar for coffee or cereal. Soap also was scarce, and worth from three to five dollars per pound. I returned with all the sugar and the chocolate, also three bars of soap as my Christmas present to this German soldier. Was it sorrow that softened my heart? Or was it magic that the holy Christmas season had cast over my soul? But all my good intentions were wrecked for the moment by the vigilant military policeman who walked up just as I returned with the bundle. The German and his family, alarmed at the presence of the guard, walked away. I felt that they were as disappointed as I was. I followed them at a distance. Soon I lost sight of the policeman, but I continued to follow the trio I had met in the park.

The German soldier realized that I was following them, and occasionally he would lift his arm above his head in the gesture of a cavalryman's "Forward, march". I caught the signal and followed them across the bridge that spans the Mozelle River and on into the little village across the river from Coblenz. Occasionally my better judgment warned me that it might be a trap; but immediately my heart would assure me that no baby could enter into such a plot and smile at me like this little one had done. Anyway, I was desperate that night.

They entered a cheap apartment house, and soon all four of us were in the hall on the third floor. With his finger to his lips, the German slipped the key into his door and soon we were in his humble home! How I did enjoy the prattle and laughter of his five children. They were soon assured that although I was an American, I had children back at home that Christmas night. The industrious German mother soon had soup and coffee and black bread ready to serve. She apologized through her husband's mixture of German and English for the meagre meal. She said they had been made very poor by the war, that daddy had been a successful machinist, but had been drafted into the German army. He told me that he had felt no hatred for America—in fact when the war came he was in the act of joining his brother in Philadelphia, in America—the land of opportunity. He told me that his thigh had been torn away at Chateau Thierry—that he had lain in a shellhole for fifteen hours. He tried

to tell me, as tears ran down his cheeks, of what he had seen and suffered.

It is impossible to describe the amazement of that little family, and the happiness of the children when I opened my Christmas present. The housewife said the sugar and soap meant a fortune to them; the children said the candy made them think of heaven! The hours seemed to have wings. The soldier stopped the conversation as he listened and pointed towards the window. My heart sank. I thought surely he had heard the approach of the Military Police—but it was the cathedral clock striking twelve. Christmas had come!

With bowed heads the German family began to sing softly some Christmas folk song. Then I led in prayer. It was the birthday of the Prince of Peace. I felt that it was fitting that it should find two of the world-war enemies at peace! No one spoke for several minutes. I felt that the German soldier was thinking of the same things that were in my mind; the trenches—the shells—the wounded, and—the dead. Over the fields of Belgium and France, friend and foe, they lay that night—many in unknown graves—the price of war and hate. After two thousand years of the telling of the Christmas story a world had gone mad and its people had maimed and killed each other! Would this Christmas mean the end of war?

Soon I was saying goodbye to my German friends and their children. We had enjoyed our Christmas together in spite of the order forbidding fraternizing



with "the enemy", for who could have hate in his heart on Christmas Eve? Unfortunately, a military policeman saw me leave the apartment! He followed at a distance, hoping that I would be held up on the Mozelle bridge, but I carried a "white pass", and it was necessary only to show it to be allowed to pass anywhere in the American area of occupation. The bridge guard merely glanced at my pass and saluted me. I quickened my pace as I crossed the bridge and, turning abruptly to the left into an alley, threw the pursuer off my trail. It was with much relief that I slipped into my room, to lie a long time thinking of that strange visit on Christmas Eve. I never saw the German friends again, but I know now that a loving Heavenly Father brought us together on that lonely night, and allowed my heart to bask in the glow of a real, though impoverished, home, and to revel in the laughter of happy children.

\* \* \* \* \*

The clatter of horses' hoofs awoke me Christmas morning. For a moment, I could not realize where I was. I had been dreaming of home and our own Christmas tree. What a shock to find that I had come back from the land of Dreams to cold, cruel Reality!

From my window I saw that a regiment of U.S. Cavalry was clattering across the pontoon bridge that led across the Rhine to Ehrenbreitstein. They were crossing the river to participate in a review on the

top of the impregnable fortress known as the Gibraltar of the Rhine. A whole division of troops could be quartered inside this marvellous fortress. But this Christmas morning found the stars and stripes floating over this German fort. I stood for a long time looking over the Rhine valley, from the equestrian statue of Emperor William's father, William I, on the left to the giant railroad bridge that spanned the Rhine far on my right. I read my cablegram again! My mind was bewildered as I tried to imagine what kind of a Christmas my family—at least the surviving members—were having that day.

As I stood by the window, a resounding knock at my door brought me back from my reveries. An orderly announced that I would be the guest of the Headquarters officers in Coblenz that day in the main dining room of Hotel Coblenzerhof. General Dickman was then in command of the ten divisions occupying the area known as the American zone at the Coblenz bridge head. The English were quartered along the Rhine on our left, with headquarters at Cologne; the French were on our right, grouped around Mayence. The General Chaplain of the United States' Army, Bishop Brent, had sent me into Germany as a "Cheer up Chaplain" attached to the Third Army. A Catholic Priest, known affectionately as "Father Dunnegan", and who was wounded in battle, was now the chief chaplain of the Third Army under General Dickman. Associated with him was Chaplain Krohngold, a Hebrew, and myself.

The mention of the Jewish chaplain always brings back the memory of that night when he awoke me saying:

"Wake up, Chaplain Hogg, and keep me company. For some strange reason I am sleepless tonight."

After a bit of general conversation, he said:

"My room is too close to yours. No wonder I can't sleep. Fancy a Jew trying to sleep with a Hog(g)!"

The Chief Chaplain of the U.S. Army, Bishop Brent, a great soul, has lately passed on to his reward. He was Episcopal bishop of the diocese of Rhode Island before the war. I have been told that he confirmed General Pershing in the Episcopal Church at General Headquarters. After my injury, Bishop Brent ordered me to General Headquarters for a conference. I still walked on a cane, and was wasted from my injury and illness. He told me that the division with which I came to France as chief chaplain was returning in a few days, and that I could have my choice of returning with them or of doing a great service by accompanying the Third Army into Germany. He added:

"The boys have lost much of their morale. Naturally they want to go home as the war is over. You have been dubbed the "Cheer Up Chaplain", and your duty orders you to Germany."

Next day I left in an automobile for the advanced Headquarters in Coblenz. It was a journey full of

horrible sights as we passed through the war-torn zone. The German troops were retiring ahead of us, and frequently we saw the abandoned caissons and occasionally a worn-out automobile—all showing that the enemy has suffered terribly in the four years of the war.

My heart ached every mile of the trip into Germany, because I felt that I was needed so at home. Now that the war was over it seemed terrible that I had to go on further away from my family and away from the resumption of my ministry in the church I loved. When the fatal telegram came three days before Christmas, one thought at least gave me a measure of comfort. If I had gone home with my division I could not have reached home before the death of my child.

As I was dressing for the mid-day meal, where I was to be the guest of the Headquarters officers, an officer handed me a letter that had arrived that morning in the official mail from General Pershing's headquarters. It contained some words of commendation from the general and a cheque for one thousand francs. This was from a fund given by some friend of Bishop Brent to be distributed as he saw fit among the officers of the American Expeditionary Force. How the money cheered me, but mocked me because of my inability to give it to my family that day.

The officer that brought me the letter informed me that General Pershing had sent twelve turkeys for our Christmas dinner! With an appetite whetted by

this information, we went down to the dining-room. As I entered the room, bedecked for Christmas festivities, an orderly delivered to me an emergency message from the base hospital. A soldier was dying and wanted a protestant chaplain with him in his last hours. Somewhat disappointed, I left the Christmas dinner, and rushed back with the messenger in the side car of his motor-cycle.

We had a lovely view of the Rhine Valley as we rode up the hill to the general hospital. In the distance the Rhine looked like a silver ribbon. On my right, as we rushed to the hospital, lay the cemetery where I had laid away the bodies of scores of soldiers stricken by disease, or who had died of illness caused by old wounds. My heart sank as we passed this hallowed spot. I thought of Christmas in the homes from which they went away a year ago with patriotic and exultant hearts. What would the day mean to those bereaved families back in the States? How desolate would be hearts that sat down to their Christmas dinner—each circle with a vacant chair!

The nurses had tried to bring the Christmas spirit to the base hospital; a wreath of holly here and there told eloquently that tender hearts had done their best to make this Christmas less desolate. The door of a ward opened softly and a nurse whispered:

"Chaplain, I am so glad you came. There are thirty-odd poor fellows in this ward, all suffering from old lung wounds that are giving them trouble after influenza or pneumonia. This is the empiemia—lung

abcess—ward. Most of these boys are doomed. Do what you can to comfort them. Your man is the last one on the right—he is dying now—but has amazing vitality. However, he may die any minute."

We entered the ward of death! Most of the boys were too far gone to notice me. I went immediately to the little iron bed where the soldier lay who had sent for me. I laid my hand on his forehead and whispered softly, "Buddy, this is the sky-pilot."

The nurse said, "You will have to speak louder; he can't hear you."

I raised my voice. He opened his eyes, and recognized me by the silver crosses on my shoulder. He gasped:

"Three things, Chaplain. Read,—pray—, and finish my letter. It's under my pillow."

When he said, "Read", I knew there was only one Book in all the world from which he cared to have me read. I took the little khaki-covered New Testament from my pocket and began to read its precious promises. A strange, sweet smile spread over his pain-drawn face. When I read, "There remaineth a rest for the people of God", he lifted his hand and said feebly,

"That's it! Read to other boys."

The ward physician walked away, choking with sobs. The nurse wiped her eyes. I asked her if it would be all right to read it to all the boys. She asked them if I should read the Bible to them. Those who

were conscious nodded their heads. One boy, lifting his hand, beckoned me to come closer, and gasped,

"Please read it again for me."

How they feasted on God's Word in that room of death that Christmas day!

As I walked back to the soldier whom I had come to visit, I noticed a tomato can with one little flower in it. It rested in a box near my dying soldier's bed. The nurse volunteered:

"One of his friends brought it this morning as his Christmas gift. I was so sorry not to have a pretty vase for it."

With the can and flower in my hand, my heart was touched by the love of that doughboy for his dying friend, and these words came to mind:

*"It is not the weight of jewel, or plate,  
Or the rustle of silk and fur;  
It is the spirit in which a gift is rich,  
Like those of the wise men were:  
For we are not told whose gift was gold,  
And whose was the gift of myrrh."*

Tears were in the dying soldier's eyes. I asked him if he were afraid to die. His steel-grey eyes seemed to light up as he said:

"Me, afraid! Why, I've lived with death for over a year. That's my blouse hanging there."

I followed his eyes to look on a khaki coat that was very much worn. On the left shoulder was a

large red figure, "I"; on the left sleeve there were three gold stripes. They meant he was in the First Division, and had been over there eighteen months. On his right sleeve, two gold stripes told that he had been wounded twice. Several decoration ribbons on the breast told of his valor under fire. I replied:

"No, buddy, I'm sure you are brave, but how is it with your soul?"

He looked up at me and smiled: "All is well with my soul."

We prayed together. His labored breathing made him pray in gasps, but his soul took the wings of prayer and arose to the throne of God.

When I got up from my knees, he whispered: "The letter."

I found it under his pillow. He had tried to write his mother several days before, but was unable to finish it. It was written with a poor scrawl in pencil, and tears had blurred it in many places. I read what he had written:

"Ma:

They tell me I haven't much chance to get well. While I am able, I want to tell you how I love you. And I want you to explain it all to Genevieve. Tell her I had looked forward to our marriage when I got home, but it is no use——."

"Buddy," I said, "now go on; I will finish it." He continued:

"No, it ain't no use now. But tell her I will meet her in heaven. Give my sisters my love. Tell them I have sent my decorations to them.

"Ma, I've been a good soldier. I have been in nine battles, and have not turned my back a single time.

"Ma, I want to thank you for leading me to take Jesus as my Saviour. He has stood with me through it all. And now I am dying—and it is Christmas. But Ma, I am trusting the blood of Jesus to give me life with Him forever. It is sweet to rest in Him.

"Goodbye to you all. A merry Christmas to all of you back home, and a happy New Year. I'll meet you over there.

With love, ——."

The strain of dictating that last letter was too much for the frail body. He whispered:

"It is getting so dark in this room, but it's so bright over yonder. Lift me up."

I lifted him in my arms. The nurse gave him a hypodermic. But he was fast "going west". His head rested on my shoulder. I heard his last feeble gasp:

"I have fought 'til I'm worn out; I—have—marched—'til I am all in; I—am—goin' home—to—rest. R—e—s—t!"

He was gone.

We laid him out on the little iron bed. The nurse drew the sheet over his face. I tiptoed out of the ward of death.

In an hour I was back in Coblenz. Light was fading on that Christmas on the Rhine. The Holy Spirit comforted me with the assurance that I was at my post of duty. God had used me to speak of Jesus to a ward full of dying men. I had seen a brave soul leave to be forever with the Lord.

As I turned into the street near our headquarters, I saw a giant Christmas tree erected in front of our official office building on the bank of the Rhine River. It had been erected by General Dickman for the Third Army. There was not a present on it. But it was filled with hundreds of red, white and blue lights. It had presents for the hearts of thirty thousand homesick soldiers. It told us of home; of the firesides that missed us, and the hearts that prayed for our return.

All up and down the street soldiers, in groups, were singing the songs of home. In a nearby cathedral, I heard a great organ leading the German congregation as they sang,

*"Silent night, holy night;  
All is fair, all is bright."*

Every head was bowed—Germans and Americans—in reverent thoughts of Him who came to earth on that first Christmas night to make a way for humanity through faith in His blood to be with Him forever

where there are no wars, no hates, no tears, no good-byes, and where they never dig a grave.

The bright stars looked down that night on the Rhine as they did on the hills of Bethlehem long ago.

\* \* \* \* \*

Thirteen Christmas days have come to me and my family since that Christmas on the Rhine, but in my treasure-house of memories none is dearer. Many times my family have gathered with me in gratitude for the blessings that have come to us through Him whose memory makes Christmas sacred. Not the least of these reasons for gratitude is the remembrance that the cablegram that broke my heart was meant for some other soldier. Through some error I received another man's death message. The only shadow that lies across the memory is the thought of that poor man who never knew the truth until he came to his saddened home. Then I wonder if he came back, and did he ever know?

What a Christmas that will be when we spend it with the Lord! Loved ones who fell asleep in Christ and whom we have mourned for dead, will join us in the fellowship eternal. O blessed hope! Let us comfort one another with the promise of His coming when we gather to celebrate each blessed Christmas Day.

THE END.