

The Cow-Headed Boy

By Kathryn Hemmann



Many yuletide traditions celebrated in the United States are German in origin, from fruitcake to Christmas trees to advent calendars. In Germany, winter comes early and lingers for months, and it must be welcomed with the proper respect. Candlelight and cake are all well and good, but there are other traditions suited to the long winter nights. This is a story of one such yuletide ritual brought to Pennsylvania by German immigrants.

Although Philadelphia and Pittsburgh are large industrial cities, most of the state of Pennsylvania is rural. Fields and pastures are nestled between rolling green hills, and the land is crossed by mountains that rise like towering waves over the plains. The founding charter of Pennsylvania guaranteed the religious freedom sought by various communities came from across the sea. Some, like the Amish, still preserve their traditional way of life, while others have modernized. Regardless, the state is home to many small and isolated towns, many of which are quite picturesque and charming.

One of the more frequently visited tourist areas is Perry County, which is just above the state capital of Harrisburg. Today, Perry County is known for its state parks; but, in the early twentieth century, these forests were still wild. In the mid-1920s, a young man came to Perry County from one of the teaching colleges in Philadelphia. He was hired as the master of a small school that served a village near what's now the Tuscarora State Forest. His family was wealthy, but he had no head for business and was happy to leave the management of the family fortune to his older brothers. He was too young to serve in the Great War, but he still wanted to do good in the world.

Despite his naive idealism, this young man wasn't condescending to his students or their parents, nor was he above rolling up his shirt sleeves to help out with various tasks around the village. I suspect he may have been afraid that he would be ostracized as an outsider, and he must have worked hard to be accepted by the community. Everything went well through the end of the year. There was a somber Christmas service at the local Lutheran church followed by a festive gathering at the house of the head of the town council. After Christmas, the teacher visited his family and rang in the new year in Philadelphia.

When he returned to the village, he was surprised to find that one of his students was absent, a ruddy-faced boy by the name of Felix. When the teacher asked the other children about Felix, they gave noncommittal answers. He assumed the boy had simply caught a bad cold. After two weeks of classes passed and Felix still hadn't returned, the teacher wrote a gentle note to the boy, praying for the return of his health. When he gave the envelope to another child who lived along the same road, he was met with a blank stare. "Sir, I don't know what sort of prank you're pulling," the boy said, "but we don't know anyone named Felix." "But surely you must be the one pulling the prank," the teacher chided. "Don't pretend as if you don't walk home with him every day." The boy shrugged and left the letter on his desk as if it wasn't any of his concern. The teacher sighed and returned to his office, a small room appended to the side of the building.

Perhaps it would be helpful to double-check the details of Felix's parents. To his surprise, the teacher found that the boy's file was gone. Everything else was untouched, and there was no evidence that anyone else had entered the room or tampered with the lock on his desk drawer. When the teacher went to the town council to inquire after the boy, he was given the same blank stares, accompanied by a few half-hearted jokes about the strange ideas of people from Philadelphia. It was all very odd. Felix had been a quiet child, but not too quiet. He managed his lessons well enough and seemed to be liked by the other children. His parents hadn't left the village. The teacher still saw them around town, in fact. They always greeted him politely when they met, and they didn't appear to be grieving. The teacher was disturbed by this, much more than he wanted to admit. When he accepted the position in the village, he was prepared to have one of his younger charges taken by illness or accident. Sudden death was common enough, especially for children of that age. But for their entire existence to be forgotten...

Either something was wrong with the village, or something

was wrong with him. The village seemed as it ever was – small but prosperous, friendly and charming in its manners and customs. Perhaps he simply wasn't cut out the responsibilities of a position in such a remote area. The teacher resolved to leave at the end of the school year. He planned to tender his resignation in April, which would be more than enough time to secure a replacement.

As the days grew longer and the weather became warmer, the village bloomed with life. The spring breeze was filled with the sweet fragrance of the pastures and the cheerful birdsong of the mountain forests. The teacher was invited to prayer meetings, dances, and even a barn raising. When a group of his friends from college came to visit, they were warmly welcomed. The head of the town council hosted a party for the visitors, and it was there that the teacher was introduced to the man's daughter, a lovely young woman named Loretta. His friendship with Loretta turned to courtship, and his affections were embraced just as eagerly by Loretta's father as by the woman herself. In the end, the teacher never resigned from his post.

He spent the summer in the village helping out at the local farms, all of whom were pleased to host him. When he returned to Philadelphia in August, it was to announce his engagement to Loretta, a turn of events that met with a chilly reception from his family. A youthful sojourn into the mountains for a charitable cause could be understood, but this "holiday," as his father put it, was not meant to be permanent. The teacher was much loved by his mother, who convinced his father to hold off judgment for another year. It would be prudent to give the bride-to-be an opportunity to visit the city, perhaps for Christmas. The teacher agreed to the wisdom of waiting, but he did not extend his visit with his family. I suppose he was eager to get away from Philadelphia and return to what he was already beginning to see as his home.

The fall passed in a joyful storm of activity as the leaves blushed with crimson and the fields ripened into seas of gold. Despite the many conversations the teacher enjoyed with various people in the village during the harvest fieldwork, no one mentioned Felix, and so he allowed himself to forget his concern over the boy's disappearance.

The village began preparing for yuletide early. As soon as the harvest was finished, people busied themselves with preserving the last of the autumn apples in jams and ciders. They brewed sugar spiced with cinnamon into teardrops of candy and fashioned wax into short candles with delicately coiled wicks. When the men hunted the deer and elk that had grown large from blackberries and mushrooms, they brought back fragrant boughs of

fir trees to hang under the mossy wooden eaves of their houses.

On the morning of the winter solstice, the teacher woke early to find Loretta at his bedside. He reached for her without thinking, but she simply grasped his hands and smiled. "I was sent to fetch you for our Yule celebration," she said. "You were not invited last year, and I am sorry. This is the most important day of the year. I want to assure you that you are welcome. Today you must go to do the work of the men. Now that I am to be married, I will help with the work of the women. But the day is short, and I will see you tonight," she promised, touching her lips to the back of his hands.

The teacher met the other townsmen in the village square. They all piled into a convoy of mule-drawn wagons and rode to one of the outlying pastures. The air was crisp and clear, and a thin layer of frost glittered on the trees. The men warmed themselves with a bottle of elderberry wine, which was rich and tangy and sweet. The ritual, such as it was, was the communal slaughter of a bull calf. No magical words were spoken, and no songs were sung. Rather, each man did his part, and then they ate an early lunch of nut-brown bread freshly baked by the farm's daughters, who helped the men clean their hands and faces before they prepared the meat in the waning light of the afternoon.

The butchery was skillfully performed by the members of the town council as the men of the village watched with appreciation and made wry comments that were perhaps not suitable for the ears of women. There was to be a barbeque at the church at sundown. After the men returned to the village with their neatly butchered cuts of veal, the teacher cleaned himself and prepared for the evening's party. He dressed in clothes sent from Philadelphia by his mother in anticipation of his return with his fiancée. He arrived at church in the pale twilight just after the sun set. The air was permeated with the savory smell of cooking meat, but the people milling around in the churchyard were silent, as were the wives of the town councilmembers in the vestibule. "Tonight we must feast and give thanks," murmured the mother of his fiancée as she passed him a delicate gold-rimmed plate carrying a thick steak nested in a bed of crusty bread. The teacher accepted the plate with gratitude.

The good cheer vanished from his face when he saw what had been consecrated above the altar. The congregation ate silently as they stared at the abomination, their eyes blank and their faces slick with the juice of the meat. The teacher quietly placed his plate on a wooden pew before turning and walking out of the church. He kept his head down and his pace brisk as he slipped behind the houses lining

the main street. Once he entered the shadows of the surrounding forest, he dropped his pretense of calm and ran for all he was worth.

In the next town over, he used his pocket watch as collateral to hire a horse, which he rode in a mad gallop to Harrisburg, where he spent the night crouched at the gate of the train station. His parents and brothers were surprised to see him back in Philadelphia. They were even more alarmed when he declined to leave his room. He refused to take any meals at all and recoiled at the smell of food. The family doctor was summoned, but the prodigal son could not explain why he returned.

The teacher's tale ends here, and I must admit that I'm unsure of what happened to him. The family has made significant donations a local university library, under whose auspices I was able to track down a letter from the doctor who attended the teacher. In this letter, the doctor asks if his condition has improved, and he expresses a morbid curiosity about something he calls the "cow-headed boy." On the eve of his homecoming, all the young man would say, in a stream of dark whispers, was that "the boy had a cow for a head" and that "we must feast and give thanks."