

The *Christmas* Porringer

Can a humble porringer change not only
a child's Christmas, but the heart of a thief?



Evaleen Stein

This edition published 2025
by Living Book Press
Copyright © Living Book Press, 2025

ISBN: 978-1-922974-54-9 (hardcover)
978-1-922974-53-2 (softcover)

First published in 1914.

This edition is based on the 1914 printing by The Page Company.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any other form or means – electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner and the publisher or as provided by Australian law.



A catalogue record for this
book is available from the
National Library of Australia

*The
Christmas Porringer*
by

EVALEEN STEIN





“THE STARTLED WONDER GREW IN HER BLUE EYES AS SHE
STARED DOWN AT THE THINGS AT HER FEET.”

Contents

1.	Karen Asks About Christmas	1
2.	Buying the Porringer	14
3.	Robber Hans	31
4.	Robber Hans and the Porringer	43
5.	Hans Turns Sailor	56
6.	At the Rag-market	65
7.	Grandmother and Karen	83
8.	Christmas Eve Again	93
9.	Karen Perplexed	100
10.	The Porringer Finds a Resting-place	106

CHAPTER I

Karen Asks About Christmas



OVER the old Flemish city of Bruges the wintry twilight was falling. The air was starry with snowflakes that drifted softly down, fluttering from off the steep brown roofs, piling up in corners of ancient doorways, and covering the cobblestones of the narrow streets with a fleecy carpet of white.

At a corner of one of the oldest of these and facing on another no wider than a lane, but which bore the name of *The Little Street of the Holy Ghost*, a number of years ago there stood a quaint little house built of light yellow bricks. It had a steep gabled roof, the bricks that formed it being arranged in a row of points that met at the peak beneath a gilded weather-vane shaped like an arrow. The little house had no dooryard, and a wooden step led directly from its entrance to the

flagstones that made a narrow, uneven walk along that side of the street.

Icicles hung from the edge of the brown roof and twinkled in a crystal fringe around the canopy of the little shrine up in the corner of the dwelling. For, like so many others of the old city, the little house had its own shrine. It was a small niche painted a light blue, and in it, under a tiny projecting canopy of carved wood, stood a small figure of the Virgin Mother holding the Christ-child in her arms. Now and then a starry snowflake drifted in beneath the canopy and clung to the folds of the Virgin's blue robe or softly touched the little hands of the Christ-child nestling against her breast.

And, by and by, as the wind rose and blew around the corner of the house, it began to pile up the snow on the sills of the casement windows whose small panes of glass lighted the room within, where sat an old woman and a little girl. The woman was clad in a plain black gown, such as is still worn by the humbler of the Flemish dames, and on her silvery hair was a stiffly starched cap of white.

The little girl was dressed much the same, save that her light brown hair was not hidden but braided in

two plaits that were crossed and pinned up very flat and tight at the back of her head.

The woman was bending over a rounded pillow, covered with black cloth, which she held in her lap; it was stuck full of stout pins, and around these was caught a web of fine threads each ending in a tiny bone bobbin, and beneath her skillful fingers, as they deftly plied these bobbins in and out, a delicate piece of lace was growing; for it was thus that she earned bread for herself and the little girl.

Indeed, the lace of Bruges, made by the patient toil of numberless of her poorer people, has for many centuries been famous for its fineness and beauty. And those who so gain their livelihood must often begin to work while they are still children, even as young as the little girl who sat there in the twilight by the window of the little yellow house.

She, too, was bending over a black-covered pillow, only hers was smaller and had fewer bobbins than that of the white-capped woman beside her; for the child was just beginning to learn some of the simpler stitches. But though the bit of lace on the pillow showed that she had made good progress, she was working now

slowly and had already broken her thread twice, for her mind was full of other thoughts.

She was thinking that the next night would be Christmas Eve, and that she would set her little wooden shoes by the hearth, and that if she had been good enough to please the Christ-child, he would come while she was asleep and put in them some red apples and nuts, or perhaps — perhaps he might bring the little string of beads she wanted so much. For Flemish children do not hang up their stockings for Santa Claus as do the children of our land, but instead, at Christmas time, they set their little shoes on the hearth and these they expect the Christ-child himself to fill with gifts.

As the little girl by the window now thought and thought of Christmas, her fingers dropped the thread at last and, looking up from her task with her blue eyes full of dreams, “Grandmother,” she said softly, “will the Christ-child surely come again tomorrow night? And do you think he will bring me something?”

“Why, yes, Karen, thou hast been a good child,” answered Grandmother, who was trying hard to finish a difficult part of her lace pattern before the dark fell.

“And, Grandmother,” went on Karen, after thinking a little longer, “is it really his own birthday?”

“Yes, yes, child,” said Grandmother.

“Then,” said Karen, as a bewildered look crept into her eyes, “why is it that he brings gifts to me, instead of my giving something to him? I thought on people’s birthdays they had presents of their own. You know on my last one you gave me my blue kerchief, and the time before, my pewter mug.” Karen considered a moment more, and then she added: “Is it because we are so poor, Grandmother, that I have never given the Christ-child a Christmas present?”

Here Grandmother’s flying fingers paused an instant, though still holding a pair of the tiny bobbins, as she answered, “It is true we are poor, Karen, but that is not the reason. No one gives such gifts to the Christ-child.”

“Thou must give him obedience and love; dost thou not remember what Father Benedicte told thee? And then, too, thou knowest thou art to carry a wax candle to the cathedral for a Christmas offering at the shrine of the Blessed Virgin and Child.”

“But,” continued Karen perplexedly, “does *no* one give him something for his very *own*?”

“There, there, child,” said Grandmother, with a note of weariness in her patient voice, “I cannot work and answer thy questions!”

And Grandmother bent still closer over the flower of lace which she was trying so hard to finish, and the little girl became silent.

After a while, from the beautiful tall belfry that soared into the sky from the center of the city, the chimes rang out the hour, and, no longer able to see in the gathering dusk, Grandmother rose and laid aside her work.

“Come, Karen,” she said, “put up thy work, and get thy shawl and go fetch some water for the tea-kettle.”

The little girl carefully placed her lace-pillow on a shelf at one side of the room; and taking a knitted shawl from a peg near the doorway, she ran to the dresser and lifted down a copper tea-kettle, polished till it shone. Then she unbarred the door and sped out into the snowy dusk.

She had but a short distance to go to the quaint pump that served the neighborhood. It stood among the cobblestones of the narrow street, and had been made long, long ago, when the workmen of even the commonest things loved their craft and strove to make everything beautiful that their fingers touched. So the pump had a wonderful spout of wrought iron shaped like a dragon’s head; and as Karen tugged at the long,

slender handle of the same metal, she laughed to see how the icicles hung from the dragon's mouth like a long white beard. She liked to pretend that he was alive and wanting to eat her up, and that she was very brave to make him fill her tea-kettle; for Karen loved fairy stories and lived a great deal in her own thoughts.

Meantime, the dragon had not eaten her, and the copper tea-kettle was brimming over with cold water, seeing which she stooped and lifting it in both hands, carefully carried it back to the little yellow house and set it on the hearth where Grandmother had raked out some glowing coals. Then she lighted a candle, and helped prepare their simple evening meal of coarse brown bread and coffee, though this last was for Grandmother; for Karen there was a pewter mug full of milk.

When they had finished their supper, Grandmother placed her lace-pillow on the table close to the candle and again busied herself with her work. For the wife of Burgomaster Koerner had ordered the lace, and it must be finished and sent home the next day.

And Grandmother sorely needed every penny she could earn; for, since Karen had neither father nor mother, there was no one but herself to gain a livelihood until the little girl grew older and could help carry the

burden. To be sure, Grandmother was not really so old as she looked, but many years of toil over the lace-pillow had bent her back and taken the color from her face. While Karen's father had lived they had known more of comfort; but when he died and the mother had followed soon afterward, leaving her baby girl to Grandmother's care, there had been but little left with which to buy their bread. That had been eight years before, but Grandmother had struggled bravely on; she was one of the most skillful of the scores of lace-makers of the old city, and so she had managed still to keep the little yellow house in which she had always lived, and to shield Karen from knowing the bitterest needs of the poor.

But Grandmother was weary; and as now she bent over the fairylike web of lace in which she had woven flowers and leaves from threads of filmy fineness, she was glad that the piece was almost finished, and that she would have the blessed Christmas day in which to rest.

And while Grandmother's fingers flew back and forth among the maze of pins, Karen was busy tidying up the hearth and the few dishes which she neatly set back on the old-fashioned dresser near the fireplace. Then she drew a little stool close to the hearth, and,

resting her chin on one hand, looked dreamily into the fire.

She was still thinking of Christmas eve, and the more she thought the more she wanted to give something to the Christ-child. For she was a generous-hearted little girl and loved to share any little pleasures with her friends, especially those who had been so good to her. And she considered the Christ-child the most faithful friend she knew, “for,” she said to herself, “as far back as I can remember, he has come every Christmas while I was asleep, and has always put something in my wooden shoes. And to think that no one gives him any present for himself!” For Karen could not see how giving him one’s obedience or love (for, of course, every one expected their friends to love them anyway!), or offering a wax candle in the shrine at the cathedral, could take the place of some little gift that he might have for his very own.

Surely, she thought, the Christ-child must like these things just as other children do. If only she had some money to buy something for him, or if only she had something of her own nice enough to offer him! She went over in her mind her little possessions; there was her blue kerchief, her pewter mug, her rag doll, her



“RESTING HER CHIN ON ONE HAND, LOOKED DREAMILY INTO THE FIRE.”

little wooden stool; but none of these things seemed just right for the Christ-child. And, besides, she felt that he was so wonderful and holy that his present should be something not only beautiful, but also quite new and fresh.

Poor Karen gave a sigh to think she had not a penny to buy anything; and Grandmother, looking up from her work, said, "What is the matter, child?" And as Karen said nothing, "Where is thy knitting?" asked Grandmother, "'tis yet a little while till bedtime; see if thou canst remember how to make thy stitches even, the way I showed thee yesterday."

"Yes, Grandmother," answered Karen; and going into the little room that opened off from the living-room, she came back with a bit of knitting and again seating herself on the wooden stool, began carefully to work the shining needles through some coarse blue yarn. For little Flemish girls even as young as she were not thought too small to be taught not only the making of lace, but also how to knit; and their hands were seldom allowed to be idle.

Indeed, the folk of the humbler class in Bruges had to work long and industriously to keep bread on their tables and a shelter over their heads.

The city had once been the richest and most powerful in all Flanders, and up to her wharves great ships had brought wonderful cargoes from all over the world; and the rulers of Bruges and her merchant citizens had lived in the greatest splendor. The wealthy people were wealthier and the poorer people less poor in those old days. But then had come bitter wars and oppression; the harbor had slowly filled up with sand brought down by the river Zwiijn, till at the time when Karen lived, Bruges was no longer the proud and glorious city she had once been, but was all the while becoming poorer and poorer.

It was true there were many ancient families who still lived at ease in the beautiful old carved houses facing on shady squares or built along the edges of the winding canals that everywhere threaded the once busy city; though the quiet water of these now scarcely rippled save when the trailing branches of the overhanging willow trees dipped into them, or a fleet of stately white swans went sailing along. But in the poorer parts of the city the people must work hard, and there were whole streets where every one made lace; and all day long women and girls, old and young, bent over the

black-covered pillows just as Karen's Grandmother was at that moment doing.

Grandmother's fingers steadily plied the tiny bobbins in and out long after Karen had put away her knitting and crept into the little cupboard bed which was built into the wall of the small room next to the living-room.

At last, as the candle burned low, the lace was finished; and carefully unpinning it from the pillow, Grandmother laid it in a clean napkin; and then she raked the ashes over the embers of the fire on the hearth, and soon her tired eyes closed in sleep as she lay in the high-posted bed close to Karen.

CHAPTER II

Buying The Porringer



THE next morning was bright and clear, and the sunshine sparkled over the freshly fallen snow and touched all the icicles with rainbow light.

Karen and her Grandmother were astir early. The little girl fetched down some wood from the small attic over the living-room, where they kept their precious supply for the winter; and then she set the table as Grandmother prepared the porridge for their breakfast.

After breakfast Grandmother took her lace-pillow and began arranging her pins and bobbins for another piece of work; and when Karen had dusted the simple furniture and swept the snow from the doorstep, she put on her knitted hood and shawl, and, pinning together the napkin in which Grandmother had placed

the piece of lace, she set out for the home of Madame Koerner.

Down the narrow street she passed, and then across an old stone bridge that spanned one of the lazy canals that wandered through the city. The ice had spread a thin sheet over this, and the beautiful white swans that swam about on it in the summertime had gone into the shelter of their little wooden house, which stood on the bank under a snowy willow tree. One of the great shining birds, looking herself like a drift of snow, stood at the door of the little shelter house preening her feathers in the sunlight, and Karen waved her hand to her with a smiling “Good-morning, Madame Swan!” for she loved the beautiful creatures, numbers of which are still seen on all the waterways of Bruges, and she always spoke to them, and sometimes brought them crumbs from her bits of coarse bread at home.

Beyond the bridge she sped on past rows of tall brown houses with here and there a little shop crowded in between, and presently her way led across the Grande Place, a large, irregular square in the center of the city. Here there were many shops, and people passing to and fro; and among them went numbers of great shaggy dogs harnessed to little carts filled with vegetables or

tall copper milk cans, and these they tugged across the cobblestones to the ancient Market Halles from which towered the wonderful belfry of which every one in Bruges was so proud.

Karen paused to listen while the silvery chimes rang out, as they had rung every quarter hour for more than three hundred years.

Then she passed on into a long, quiet street where the houses stood farther apart and had rows of trees in front of them. Some of them had high walls adjoining them, and behind these were pretty gardens, though now, of course, all were covered with the wintry snow.

Presently Karen stopped at a wooden gate leading into one of these gardens, and, pushing it open, made her way along a winding path to the door of a tall house with many gables and adorned with rare old carvings. This was the home of Madame Koerner; the house really faced on the street, but the little girl did not like to go to the more stately entrance, and so chose the smaller one that opened into the garden. She knocked timidly, for she was a little in awe of Madame Koerner, who seemed to her a very grand lady. But the maid who opened the door knew Karen and led her in and

took her at once to the upstairs room where Madame Koerner sat with a fine piece of needlework in her lap.

Madame Koerner smiled kindly at the little girl, who had several times before brought Grandmother's lace to her. "Good-morning, Karen," she said. "I am so glad to have the lace, for now I can finish this cap, which I want for a Christmas gift." And then, as she unfolded the napkin and looked at the lace, "O," she cried, "how lovely it is! No one in all Bruges does more beautiful work than thy Grandmother, little one! And some day, I dare say, thou, too, wilt do just as well, for I know thou art learning fast." And she smiled again, and patted Karen's hands as the little girl held out the lace for her to see.

Karen colored with pleasure to hear Grandmother's work praised, as indeed it deserved; for the delicate scrolls and flowers and leaves of it looked as if made of frost and caught in a net of pearly cobwebs.

Madame Koerner was so pleased with it that when the little girl laid it down, she looked in her purse and gave her a generous gold piece for Grandmother, and then she added a smaller piece of silver for Karen herself. "That is for thee, little one," she said. "And I hope thou wilt have a very happy Christmas."

Karen thanked her shyly, and, as with shining eyes she turned to go, Madame Koerner said, "Go out through the kitchen, child, and tell Marie, the cook, to fill thy napkin with some of the little cakes she is baking."

So when once more Karen tripped out into the street, her heart was very light and her mind full of happy thoughts as she tightly clasped in one hand the gold piece for Grandmother, and in the other the franc of silver which Madame Koerner had given for her own, and the napkin filled with the Christmas cakes. These were the kind that all Flemish children delight in, and were made of fine gingerbread and filled with candied orange peel and red cherries.

As Karen came near the Grande Place and saw the Market Halles, her eyes fairly danced, for she knew the Christmas market was going on there, and all the way from Madame Koerner's she had kept saying to herself: "Now I can buy a present for the Christ-child and one for Grandmother!"

Outside the Halles the cobblestones had been swept clean of snow, and a few hardy dealers had placed their wares for sale out of doors. But these were chiefly sellers of leather harnesses for the patient Flemish dogs, of wooden shoes and coarse baskets; and some had

piled in front of them small bundles of firewood and fagots. But none of these wares interested Karen, and so she stepped inside the Halles where one might find all manner of things for sale. Here were stalls piled with different colored cloths, with kerchiefs and laces; in others were displayed great earthen pots and pans and other gear for the kitchen. And there were sellers of Christmas trinkets, and wax candles, and what not; of the milk in the tall copper cans the dogs had drawn thither in their little carts; of winter vegetables, and food and sweetmeats of various kinds.

“See!” called a white-capped woman, who sat behind a stall heaped with little cakes. “Here are caraway cookies fit for the king’s children, and only four sous the dozen!”

But Karen felt very rich with the Christmas cakes in her napkin, and so was not to be tempted. As she stepped slowly along, looking first at one side and then the other, presently she came to a stall where colored beads and trinkets of many kinds were arranged on a long strip of scarlet cloth. As she saw these, she could not help but stop and look longingly at a little necklace of blue beads, the very kind she had wanted for so long a time!