

THE ORNAMENT MAKER



DIANN MILLS

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The Ornament Maker

Roch lived in an old German village called Glücklich, which means happy and blessed. But the people didn't live up to their village's name. They seldom smiled or showed kindness to others, and Roch shared their attitude. If anyone had the right to be grumpy, it was Roch. He'd been crippled in his left leg since birth. Without the ability to walk, his livelihood depended on what he could grow in his garden. Special skills escaped him, and he became the harshest person in Glücklich.

Until—

One snowy Christmas Eve, a scratching at the door, like a wild animal, alarmed him. Roch grabbed his crutch and tucked a broom under his arm as a weapon. At the door, he paused and called out, "Who goes there?"

"Dear Roch, I have a Christmas gift for you," a woman said in the sweetest voice he'd ever heard.

How did the woman know his name? He forced more gruffness than usual into his voice. "I don't want your gift. Take it somewhere else."

"This isn't from me but your heavenly Father."

His father had died before Roch had been born, and from what his mother said, the man didn't thrive in heaven. "You have the wrong person."

"Oh, I have the right man. I wish I could give this to you personally, but I understand your wariness. I'll leave it at your door. Merry Christmas, beloved one. God loves you."

How could one woman speak as though she were singing? He humphed. Believing in God was for fools.

Roch moved back to the fire and stared at the dying embers. He'd neglected to bring in wood earlier, mostly because the job took so much effort. With a heavy sigh and an angry heart for his useless leg, he again moved to the door hobbling on his crutch to bring in one log at a time.

The door creaked open on its tired hinges before Roch lifted the latch. Odd. He peered out into the darkness, save for a half moon and a star-filled sky that lit up the snow. On his doorstep sat a pine tree nearly five feet tall, the trunk in dirt wrapped with coarse cloth. Beside the tree lay a wooden box with a carved lid. Even with his crutch holding him far above the box, he read his name—Roch Friedrich.

Startled, he nearly fell. No one had ever given him anything but beatings when he was younger, except his mother. His home and meager furnishings had been from her. Now at age fifty, he waited for the gift of death.

Roch searched the darkness for signs of the woman. Not even footprints sunk into the snow. How peculiar. Should he leave the tree and box outside? Why him? He'd heard about Christmas trees. Folks who believed in God decorated them with candles and whatever else they could find. Sounded like foolishness to him.

The wind blew a harsh chill around him, and he decided to bring in the gifts. After all, they stood in the way of hauling in firewood. An hour later, a much-exhausted Roch eased down onto a chair by the fire. Flames lapped up the wood, giving a cozy and warm amber glow to the small room.

He lifted the box into his lap. His name on the lid looked . . . pleasing, causing a rare smile. Nothing needed to be inside, the box had served its purpose as Roch's gift.

With a sigh, he lifted the lid. Inside lay a small knife, a carver's tool, and pieces of Linden wood in various sizes. He remembered his mother making tea from Linden flowers when he suffered from a bad cold. For a moment, he recalled her sweet smile and white-blonde hair. Shaking his head to bring himself to the present, he wrapped his fingers around a small scroll tucked along one side of the box. He spread the scroll across his lap and read by firelight.

DEAR ROCH,

You are loved by God. The pine tree is for you to decorate now and plant in the spring. It's triangular shape symbolizes the Holy Trinity. I know years have passed since your mother told you about the birth of Jesus, but you haven't forgotten. At the bottom of the box is a Bible to light your way.

The Linden wood is suitable for carving ornaments in whatever fashion you choose, from fruit to images that reflect the first Christmas. Once the villagers see your skill, they will want the ornaments and small tools you can carve. Your livelihood is now secured.

May your life show the love of God.

NO SIGNATURE, only the unusual request. Roch pulled piece after piece of Linden wood from the box until he reached a cloth covered Bible. Mother had taught him to read from it, but then she had to sell her Bible to a traveling villager for food.

Why had someone gone out on such a cold night to give him these gifts? He stayed to himself to avoid the ridicule of his crippled leg, and his only friends were the rabbits and birds that found refuge around his cottage. Moments later, he opened the Bible to the Gospel of Luke and read the first accounting of Jesus' birth. Mother had read the story to him every Christmas of his life. As he pondered over the words, he could hear her voice, and it soothed his bitterness. Mother believed in God, but she died . . . then again, all humans must die. The afterlife is what confused Roch.

The hour grew late, but he didn't feel the usual exhaustion. Laying the Bible aside, he examined the carving tool and rolled it over in his palm. With a hopeful sigh, he grasped a piece of wood. What could he carve?

Roch stared at the small piece of wood and carving tool for several minutes before he decided to try his hand at fashioning a small wooden apple. They were his favorite fruit in fall. But how did he begin?

Mother often spoke of her father who'd made tools and small items from wood. Roch searched his mind for some of his mother's stories. Carving with or against the grain meant the difference between a weakened piece and one of beauty. Softwoods were easier to work with, but the hardwoods, like the Linden, lasted longer.

Two hours later, he smiled at the apple and touched the tip of the small, curved stem. He never dreamed his fingers could carve something of beauty. Where had this newfound talent come from?

Could God have visited him with a miracle?

Excitement, a rare feeling, filled Roch. Searching through the box for the perfect size of wood, he envisioned a small lamb. Time flew until the tiny creature seemed to take on life. He tied a piece of brown yarn around the lamb's neck and hung it on the pine tree, then he did the same by tying a piece of yarn around the apple stem.

They looked . . . pretty, and a sense of satisfaction swirled through him. He studied his fingers, in awe of what he'd done. His crippled leg wasn't needed to earn a good living . . . and he could provide not only sculptured ornaments at Christmas but useful items year around.

Roch, I told you God never fails us.

His mother's words from long ago whispered in his ears. If he thought back, the woman who'd knocked on his door hours before and left the gifts sounded much like his mother. Glancing outside the window, the first hint of sunrise slowly rose across the sky. Christmas morning.

No anger burned in his heart.

No bitterness darkened his soul.

Lightheartedness captivated him, and he laughed. Actually laughed.

"Merry Christmas, Mother," he whispered. "Merry Christmas, Lord. Help me to spread Your gift to others, and happy birthday."

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



DiAnn Mills

DiAnn Mills is a bestselling author who believes her readers should expect an adventure. She weaves memorable characters with unpredictable plots to create action-packed, suspense-filled novels. DiAnn believes every breath of life is someone's story, so why not capture those moments and create a thrilling adventure?

Her titles have appeared on the CBA and ECPA bestseller lists; won two Christy Awards, the Golden Scroll, Inspirational Readers' Choice, and Carol award contests.

DiAnn is a founding board member of the American Christian Fiction Writers, an active member of the Blue Ridge Mountains Christian Writers, Advanced Writers and Speakers Association, Mystery Writers of America, the Jerry Jenkins Writers Guild, Sisters in Crime, and International Thriller Writers. DiAnn continues her passion of helping other writers be successful. She speaks to various groups and teaches writing workshops around the country.

DiAnn has been termed a coffee snob and roasts her own coffee beans. She's an avid reader, loves to cook, and believes her grandchildren are the smartest kids in the universe. She and her

husband live in sunny Houston, Texas.

Learn about all of DiAnn's books and connect with DiAnn at diannmills.com.

