

Old English Plum Pudding

By Richard Paul Jones



Every year, when I see someone's Christmas tree still glittering with decorations long after most have been removed and forgotten, it reminds me of my mother. She contrived every possible reason to delay that inevitable time when the Christmas decorations had to be boxed up and stored away for another year. But I don't think it was really the scent of spruce or the sight of brightly colored lights and sparkling ornaments she wanted to prolong. The tree was just a stately symbol for the closeness of family, the love of friends and neighbors, and the power of forgiveness that prevails during the Christmas season.

It was beyond my mother's comprehension why anybody would want to take the Christmas tree down, just because the holidays were over and the New Year beckoned. Dad and I ran across a joke somewhere that proclaimed "it's a sure sign of spring when a Scotsman takes down his Christmas tree", and we forever kidded mom about that. When we did, she would just laugh, and I think that joke became a part of the tradition she cherished.

One year, my mother struck upon the perfect foil for extending the Christmas season for two more weeks. Her delaying tactic was spawned by her participation in the Women's Society for Christian Service (WSCS), which was the ladies' service organization of the Methodist Church in our little Minnesota town.

The WSCS members volunteered to host the bi-weekly meetings in their homes, and as if by divine intervention, my mother ended up with the first meeting of the New Year. This placed it about mid-January, when most housewives would have wanted the holiday debris all cleared away before their company arrived. But not my mother – she saw this as the perfect rationale for extending the holiday season – with all its joyful feeling for *two more wonderful weeks*.



Another one of my mother's Christmas traditions enters the story at this point. To her, it just would not have been Christmas unless she made a delicious Old English plum pudding, prepared from an authentic recipe handed down from the old country. And true to that tradition, plum pudding simply could not be eaten unless it was generously drenched in a rich, brown *brandy* sauce! This sauce had been served without concern for generations, and had become a delicious feature of the WSCS meetings every January.

Until this one year, that is, when the Methodist Bishop ordained that a woman minister be assigned to our little town's church. My mother loved and admired Reverend Hartman, and never thought anything about it until after the holidays the first year, when the time approached for her annual WSCS hosting. Then it dawned on her that since Reverend Hartman was a woman, and had therefore been attending the WSCS meetings, she surely would be present when the Old English plum pudding was served this year – rich, brown brandy sauce and all.

My mother agonized for days about whether to break tradition in respect for the cloth, or to take her chances of being criticized – or even publicly chastised for serving alcohol at a Methodist Church meeting. But, by the time the appointed day arrived, mom had made up her mind to go with the flow, and hope the good Reverend didn't notice the alcohol – notwithstanding the distinctive aroma of brandy which emanated from the rich, brown sauce as it was ladled over the warm plum pudding.



Finally the day arrived and the ladies began arriving and rendering the perfunctory oohs and aahs over the somewhat forlorn Christmas tree. Then Reverend Hartman made her appearance, and the WSCS meeting was called to order. Most of the ladies were hoping for a short meeting so they could get on with the annual plum pudding, which probably represented their only chance of the year to leave a WSCS meeting feeling a slight buzz.

In any case, the moment of truth had arrived, and my mother began serving the long-anticipated refreshments – still wondering whether she would be condemned to eternal damnation for serving alcohol at a WSCS meeting. Finally, when everyone had been served, my mother watched with bated breath to see Reverend Hartman take her first bite of Old English plum pudding, with the rich, brown brandy sauce. No comments were forthcoming after the first bite or the second or third. And finally as mom watched and waited, the good Reverend wiped up the remaining brandy sauce with her last bite of plum pudding. And as she savored that last bite, she turned to mom and said, “That sure was delicious; would it be all right if I had another piece”?

After a few more years, the Bishop decreed that Reverend Hartman move on to another church, and a male minister arrived to take her place. Perhaps he did so very capably on

Sunday morning, and in performing his various church duties, but the WSCS meetings were never quite the same – especially the after-Christmas session when the ladies joyfully consumed their Old English plum pudding with the rich, brown brandy sauce.