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## Lost Words

by Sue Hitchcock

Alfreda opened her eyes when the cockerel crew the second time. Her husband had already risen to herd the kine in for milking and there was much to do in the short days before Yuletide. She quickly slipped her warm tunic over her shift and laced it tight, then cinched her waist with a girdle, useful for gathering up her skirts when she was in the yard.

First she took the chamber pot, slipping into her pattens by the door. She would empty it on the gean today, every fruit tree had to have its turn. After returning the pot to its place under the bed – her husband called it the “gesunder” because of its home, under the bed – she looked into the children’s bedchamber. They could sleep a while, till she had readied the food.

The first chore was to light the fire, in the bread oven today as well as in the hearth. There was already kindling but she needed the flint in the tinder box to make a spark. Alfreda nurtured the flame and started to feed it at first with twigs, then with logs until the kitchen was warm enough for the children. For breakfast they could have frumenty, which she had prepared the night before, instead of the usual groats.

This was Friday, a baking day, so she fetched some balm from the wort she was brewing for the Yuletide ale and mixed it with the maslin in a bowl, then placed it on a stool by the hearth, shielding it from the ashes with a linen cloth.

Soon her husband and three children were baying for breakfast, the baby supported by the older two on the bench, but her husband was seated on the settle in front of the fire to warm himself. She ladled some milk into a beaker for the infant and brought a ewer of ale for the rest.

Once the table was cleared, Gisela was keen to help knead the dough with her mother. When it was formed into loaves it was left to rise some more, but a treat on baking days was the little square pies, called coffins. Meat was forbidden on a Friday, so they would be filled with wurzels and leeks. They would be savory enough with the leftover pease pottage from yesterday. The bread was cooked first, while the oven was hot, then in went the pies to be ready for noon.

Alfreda swept the spilled crumbs with a besom, took up her ladle and banged a pan at the door to signal dinnertime.