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THE CHRISTMAS DAY

A famous novelist, torn between sentiment and cynicism, wonders if the festive season means universal goodwill or a moment for moneymaking

by H. E. BATES

CHRISTMAS being the great season of pink spectacles and nostalgia for remembrance of things past, it becomes increasingly the cry of the ageing, the middle-aged and even the not-so-young that "Christmas is not quite what it was."

Wars have an unpleasant habit of playing havoc and hell with even the most cherished of human festivals and institutions, and it is perhaps not surprising that we in England—for long since now an increasingly belligerent rather than a festive people—have only a handful left. Two of the most tenacious of them are, happily, that connected with a gentleman who tried unsuccessfully to blow up the Houses of Parliament ("and considering most politicians, perhaps it wouldn't have been half a bad thing, et cetera, et cetera," says the small, rebel voice in all of us), and that connected, in all its curious jumble of sacred and pagan, with the wise men of Bethlehem, frankincense and myrrh, candles on fir trees, brass bands and kissing girls under mistletoe.

In pursuit of this melancholy theory that Christmas, and, indeed, life in general, is not quite what it was, you will, if you are a father, launch off into a heavy and hearty reminiscence of the splendour of life somewhere before 1939. Nothing is, you say, nor ever will be, quite the same as it was before that time. It—as being everything from sausages to suits, toys to turkeys—will never come back. Little do you realize—here addressing every poor contemporary little wretch who was suckled to the sweet sound of bombs—that *when I was a boy I had a penny a week to spend* (air of sunny triumph); *there were few buses and that sort of thing; we had to walk* (painful and solemn heaving of paunches); *we were content to make our own amusement* (inquiring glance for support at mother, not always answered); *we hadn't much, but we made the most of what we had* (stern and vacuous nodding of parental head); *and, moreover, you didn't catch us asking for things we knew people couldn't afford. We got a lot of fun out of simple things* (final and dreadful silence, indicating utterly invincible parental stronghold and fatherly entrenchment in belief in virtues of spartan living).

Rosy Pictures

All this will probably be accompanied by rosy pictures of the cheap and pleasant circumstances of the time. Wine was two shillings a bottle, turkeys were a shilling a pound, fowls were half a crown, pheasants were five shillings a brace. You gave a couple of bob to the postman and he practically prostrated himself in gratitude. The grocer without fail gave you a Christmas box and the wine merchant by some small accident left an extra bottle of cherry brandy "as a little something for madame." Gentlemen with whom you were in business sent you handsome turkeys and cases of brandy (you laugh; but it's true!) and you in turn sent them cases of port and handsome geese.

Astupefying and splendid generosity prevailed. Prodigious quantities of snow fell. There was skating. You went for long, healthy and ennobling walks in a countryside full of fat holly berries (there were no spivs then to come stripping them from every tree!), rubicund countrymen and choirs with fiddles. At night you danced to dances that were dances; you had fun with the good old-fashioned games. In fact—as you knock the

ash off the cigar and wonder if perhaps after all you ought not to sneak out to the kitchen and get yourself another glass of bicarbonate—they were the good old days. You'll never see them back again.

You have already received material support for this melancholy theory in the contrasting picture of life as it now surrounds you. Everything—and who but a Cabinet Minister could possibly deny it?—costs twice, ten times or fifty times as much. Gone is the tuppenny Christmas card, the penny orange, the shilling Christmas tree; and gone, almost entirely gone, it seems, the turkey. Toys continue to be made only, it seems, for the children of millionaires; cosmetics for the girl friend seem as dear—as diamonds. Borne upward on this fantastic spiral of prices, it is not surprising that you are suddenly assailed by the dark notion that Christmas is, after all, nothing but a ramp. It has become a swindle cashing in on sentimentalism and man's inherent goodwill; it is a spurious commercial façade built out of fairy tales. There is no Father Christmas; the simple and beautiful notion of Saint Nicholas is dead; and, saddest of all, the Baby in the manger is far behind.

It Will Not Change

I must confess, sometimes, to a sneaking support for all this; there are some aspects of Christmas that annoy me. But it also happens that I do not see Christmas entirely as a Christian festival; if I did I might well, confronted by some manifestations of its more rabid materialism, go out and hang myself on a weeping willow tree. Nor do I think that Christmas, assailed as it is by growing materialism everywhere and by an apparent weakening of the Christian idea of faith, is in any way dying or dead. On the contrary it seems to me reasonably arguable that if Christianity were to be expunged from life by a rival philosophy—of which Communism is an immediate example—Christmas would continue gladly on its way as the first and most important festival of the year.

We incline to forget, in fact, that December 25 was celebrated in this country as a festival long before Britain's conversion to Christianity; and Bede has recorded that "the ancient people of the Angli began the year on the twenty-fifth of December when we now celebrate the birthday of the Lord." In 1644, indeed, the Puritans went so far as to forbid any Christmas Day merriment or religious services by Act of Parliament and the ground that it was a heathen festival, and ordered that it must be kept as a day of fast.

The feast was revived by Charles II; but you will not forget that even to this day the Scots, more puritan than those of us south of the Border—but sometimes, perhaps, not much!—do not really celebrate Christmas Day. Your Christmas has in fact come down to you as a strange combination of pagan and sacred things; a curious—but not, I think, unhappy or contradictory—mixture of celebration for the Christian birth and celebration for the winter solstice, the return of the sun.

It is not an accident, either, as I see it, that these things should have come together. The sun's return and the birth of the Son of God whose message is that there is light after darkness, life after death, are really close to being the same thing; just as the Resurrection and the return of spring are the same thing, and are, in the festival of Easter, similarly fused and confused. Christmas, therefore, with all its

materialistic cashings-in, its exploitation, its presents ramp, its apparent neglect of the spiritual, really goes much deeper than you may think it does. It is really the great celebration for the upward swing out of darkness. By December 25 you have gone beyond the winter's darkest day. You are pulling back to the sun. And by the sixth of January, Twelfth Night, when the twelve days of Christmas are over and you take down those odd pagan-Christian boughs of mistletoe and holly because they would otherwise bring you bad luck, you can see unmistakably the lengthening of the days. Your celebration of triumph over winter is complete. You are coming back to the light.

Meanwhile the modern Scrooge in you, I trust, will have had a good shaking. And the modern Scrooge, as opposed to Dickens's Scrooge, is the man who thinks that Christmas is finished. It is not finished; and for the reasons I have given above I do not think it ever will be. As for Scrooge and the immortal short novel which has probably done more to perpetuate the modern sentiment of Christmas than any other book, it appears that Carlyle had not much use for them.

I do not know if Dickens on the other hand had much use for Carlyle; but I certainly never have. Dickens's theory of life, said Carlyle, was all wrong, since he thought men ought to be buttered up, and the world made soft and accommodating for them, and all sorts of fellows have turkey for dinner.

This only goes to prove, once and for all, I think, that Carlyle was Scrooge. Buttered up! Turkey for dinner! The world made soft and accommodating! Bah! It needs only the smallest stretch of imagination before I hear Mr. Carlyle continuing: *Now when I was a boy I had a penny a week to spend*; and it needs only a slight further stretching of imagination before you and I, the ageing, the middle-aged and the not-so-young, are taking the words out of Mr. Carlyle's mouth and using them for our own. "Christmas is not what it was. Everybody wants more and gives less. Men want to be buttered up. Everything has to be done for them. The world is too soft and accommodating. Far too many fellows have turkey for dinner (shades of Mr. Webb!). Things have changed and I'm not sure they have changed for the better. Everybody has more and appreciates it less. It is, in fact, very hard to know what things are coming to. *It's not like it was in the good old days.*"

Proof In The Pudding

To which I have only one reply. It is not my own; but it's brief and profound truth, its terrifying implication, its simple, bomb-like exactness make it something I should like to drop like a charm—lucky or unlucky, according to how you look at it—into your 1950 Christmas pudding; or, if you are one of those doubting fellows who no longer believe in Christmas, in the outworn philosophy that it is more blessed to give than to receive, in the gladness of children's faces in candlelight, in rejoicing by wine and song and the fruit of earth and sun, into your doubting mind. You should reflect on it before the fire when the mincepies have been reduced to crumbs. Let its warmth permeate you like a glass of port.

It comes, in the middle of this disturbed and distracted century, from a famous, witty and, I think, not altogether unprophetic American woman, who said:

"These are the good old days."