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"English Christmas
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English Christmas

BY H. E. BATES

Author of "Fair Stood the Wind for France"

HARRIS & EWING

Throughout England villages such as this are set for another rationed holiday

The Dickens touch has been missing for six years in wartime Britain. But a new Yuletide spirit is there

SIX are the wartime Christmases of Kent that I should like to write about, not five: Six, because far back on the rustic and almost forgotten edge of the war, there lies, in 1938, a Christmas standing on the threshold of such hideous possibilities that it was merciful that we did not understand what lay before us for the next five. Odd that I should have forgotten every detail about it. Curious that all its candles should have blown out, whereas the lights of the rest should burn so clearly now.

Snow Like Sugar Icing

IN 1939, the cold came on the Saturday before Christmas, and snow began to fall, if I remember rightly, on the following afternoon, so that we had snow like sugar icing on the shining leaves of holly and ice on the pond for skating on Christmas Day. The war had not made much difference to us then. The cliffs of France still lay unoccupied across the Channel and somewhere beyond them lay the front, almost as quiet as the snowy fields of Kent and the unexploded myth of the Maginot Line. Our first feeling about the war was undoubtedly boredom; our second, irritation; our third, a sort of "Oh, hell, let's forget it for at least one day." And so at least we tried to forget it. For I do not believe that any of us had any confidence in anything: in ourselves, in the future, in France, or least of all in those politicians who had lately meddled so smugly in the affairs of Czechoslovakia.

I mention Czechoslovakia for a good reason. Our guests for that snowy Christmas of 1939 were international. Two exiled Czechs, Erich and Gretel, came to help us eat our goose, bringing with them their first son, born in England, and so — as I used to be slyly fond of reminding them — an Englishman; and with them came an exiled German mother with her child, a little girl. And I can see the faces of them all now in the light of the candles on the Christmas tree and the Christmas cake, and I remember wondering how many homes there were in Germany that Christmas where English children could sit down with the children of the Czechs and children of the homeland side by side, equal, and without fear in the light of the Christmas candles.

So the memory of the Christmas of 1939 is a memory of shining exiled faces, happy in English candlelight, and of alien and exiled children happily laughing in English snow. And if we drank to anything that Christmas as I am sure we did, it was to the end of the war before spring and the return of the Czechs to Prague before summer.

By another Christmas all these foolish fantasies were as dead as ashes. Kent was now 20 miles from the battle line; the myth of impregnable France had blown up in our faces; the beaches were hedgehogged with steel, the Battle of Britain had been fought and won over the loveliest countryside of all England, and the steady shuttle service of German bombers' keeping up their relentless timetable from the coast to London completed the dark world.

Alone With Our Children

THAT Christmas they burnt London and there was more snow. But now the Czechs had gone, compulsorily moved out of our noisy, arid and forbidden zone, and the Germans with them. We were alone with our own children in our isolated snowed-up world with its ceaseless sirens, the black rumble of German night bombers, the glow of burning London and war had us by the neck.

That Christmas Day the postman got drunk and who could blame him? Christmas letters did not come till mid-afternoon. The postman — a last-war veteran with his eldest son at Dunkirk — floundered about in the heavy snow like a dog that has lost its tracks. He seemed pulverized by the hideous circumstances, and at heart we all felt, I must confess, rather like him. We had taken the fall of France, we had smelled burning oil on the June wind as it blew in from Dunkirk, we had taken one Battle of Britain and were in the process of taking another. How much more?

Perhaps it will be over by next Christmas Day. That I am sure was our boast in 1940. It is certain that we supplemented it for the children's sake with some hope about bananas. For Jonathan, the youngest, practically born under the dangerous benevolence of the Chamberlain umbrella, had never seen a banana, and so our hope that by another Christmas Jonathan should know what a banana was like must have been at least partly synonymous with our hope for a new world.

There was not much of Dickens about that Christmas, nor about the next, nor even, as I remember it, about the next. Except that there was more snow in 1941, and then no snow in 1942 or 1943, there was not much difference in them. We were very quiet. It is true that real night raids ceased, but the sirens kept on piling up a total of thousands of alerts. We had no rest from them. In Kent we were, in fact, on the track of, in the shadow of and in the thick of everything. Whatever the Germans wished to try out on England they tried out first, it seemed, on Kent; hit-and-run raids, high-flying raids, low-level raids, cross-Channel shelling. There were sometimes, I think, a few hours' or even a few days' respite from these things at Christmas time so that we were left with nothing but the simple pleasures of blackout, the hope of another year and the fact that we had no bananas.

Sing at Lighted Windows

YET all these Christmases — overshadowed as they were by the presence of Nazi guns only 20 miles away, by Nazi planes only five minutes away and by the increasing and irritating misery of alerts that got beyond counting — have an extraordinary lightness in my mind. Letters from America would tell us sometimes of carol singers' singing at the lighted windows of big houses in Boston. Curious that, except for a moment of wonder almost childlike, we never envied that free and lovely picture. It did not seem to belong to the adult world. From our blacked-out peninsula — really blacked-out, I would say, with Hell's own darkness — we would look back across the Atlantic with feelings rather of dry pity than anything else. For though we had our outer darkness, our inner light — electric candles on the Christmas tree, real,

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INTERNATIONAL

Christmas, 1940: Kent people watched London burn

EUROPEAN

Bombs didn't stop church music

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ENGLISH CHRISTMAS

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colored, wax candles on the cake and the reflected light of it all on the children's faces — seemed in consequence only more precious and more real than ever before.

Through all these Christmases, of course, we were keeping something in check. I do not know if I am able to define it. Perhaps the whole thing is explainable by the fact that although we have now on the eve of the sixth war Christmas no pressing need to observe the blackout, we still observe it faithfully.

New Kind of Candle

SOMETHING in us is afraid to pull up the blinds. For we have been confronted this year with a new thought for future Christmases. Science has lit the Kentish sky with a new kind of candle: the "doodlebug." It has presented us with something that, as an old Cockney lady said, "Ain't quite human." It has thrown onto the world a shadow that, as I see it, reaches out not only over the cherry orchards and fields of Kent, and over the drab and broken mess of London, but also a shadow that falls like a blight over those streets of Boston where carol singers stand before lighted windows of big houses and even, perhaps, over all the cities of the western world.

The thing that "ain't quite human" casts its shadow, in fact, over the most human of all festivals. When the Peace Christmas comes, we shall remember that in Kent. We shall have holly with scarlet berries and the traditional mistletoe; we shall have candles on real, iced cake and candles, as always, on the tree; we shall have turkey if we are lucky and we shall open the last can of California peaches if we are reckless, and if peace is declared we shall have champagne and we shall sing "Good King Wenceslaus" and remember the exiled Czechs with their five-year-old English son, with tears in our eyes.

Remember Doodlebugs

BUT we shall also remember doodlebugs, not only as the worst of our terrors, the robot, the thing that "ain't human," but also as the horror which ends one long, hard war and sets the starting pattern for another.

And if the champagne is open, we shall have a toast. Nor will it be a toast about bananas. Here in Kent, at least, whatever happens elsewhere, we shall look at the shining eyes of the children in the Christmas candlelight, and say we have had enough both of the glory and the tears of war. We shall say with the startling truth of the young radio speaker, talking recently on BBC, that there must be some other way of avoiding war than getting ready for it. We shall remember six Christmases of war in Kent — for there are six of them in our reckoning, no matter whatever you say — and swear by God that there shall never be another.

The End

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