# A FEAST OF MEMORIES

## Novelist H. E. Bates, full of nostalgia, recreates a vanished world with recollections of his grandfather's village and of a poignant wartime scene at the Christmas tea table.

**Since his first book was published forty-five years ago, H. E. Bates, novelist, essayist and short-story writer, has written about seventy books—including the popular novels about the irrepressible Larkin family which were made into BBC radio series. Married, with two sons and two daughters, he has lived for forty years in the Kent village that plays a part in this Christmas article.**

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and whistle and music of roundabouts, the royal pantings of splendid steam locomotives; I smell roast beef, and goose and turkey; I taste brandy-snaps, plum pudding, peppermint rock, sherbet out of lucky bags.

Mingled with the noise of fair organs rattling out *Waiting for the Robert E. Lee* are the sounds of brass and silver bands playing *Hark! the Herald Angels Sing* in gas-lit streets where poulterers' shop-fronts presented a wall of feathers, white and brown and gold and speckled, from ducks and fowls and geese and turkeys to pheasants in their coats of many colours. A hot potato stand outside a pub where a sad small band of Salvation Army lasses struck low noises of appeal on tambourines will live with me for ever as the sweet essence of Christmas Eve.

In those far-off days, before the savage holocaust of the First World War, we had a postal delivery on Sundays and, naturally, always one on Christmas Day. The next day, Boxing Day, wasn't called Boxing Day for nothing: it was the day when men, more particularly postmen, came to collect their Christmas boxes. I can still feel in my hand a clammy sixpence as I stood in the hall of our house waiting for the postman's rat-tat-tat on the front door letter box and then yet another clammy sixpence for the carol-playing silver band.

We always spent Christmas Day with my grandparents, a couple of miles away. Splendid roast fowl and roast beef, black, rich, steaming plum-pudding, nuts, dates, mincepies; all the loved emblems of the Winter Solstice. Strangely, snow plays no part in these almost painfully bright recollections. Their perpetual illumination comes always from moonlight: stark, brilliant white moonlight / *please turn to next page*

**"A hot potato stand outside a pub where a sad small band of Salvation Army lasses struck low**

UP IN THE MIDLANDS, in my boyhood of long ago, there were two annual festivals which still, when I recall them, stand out in my mind as vividly as paintings freshly done and each clothed in a golden aura of deep, deep nostalgia. The first is the Feast of Winter Solstice, more commonly known now, of course, as Christmas Day and Boxing Day; the second is an event which might well be called the Feast of the Summer Solstice, better known to Midlanders as Big Feast Sunday.

I link these two dates in the calendar because, though of religious origin, both have become to a large degree paganized. These Midland Feasts, tied as they are to a date in the Church calendar, are very much like the great *Pardons* held every summer in Brittany. These are also tied to the church, but are now less of a religious rite than an excuse for revelry, eating and drinking, chewing *pommes frites* out of paper bags and the selling of cheap junk, of which nasty crucifixes are by no means the least hideous.

In exactly the same way the Feasts had their roundabouts and swings, their coconut shies and hooplas, their brandy-snaps and spit rock and a brand of hurdy-gurdy music as debased in its own way as the Breton crucifixes.

For myself I cannot think of one of these festivals without the other. Feast Sunday, a day so much dedicated to the gathering of family clans, enshrines itself in memory as a sort of summer Christmas, just as Christmas, the greatest family date of the year, is hallowed as a Feast of its own.

Strangely, both events make their appeal over the years not so much visually as through the senses, through smell and taste and touch and sound. I hear the shriek

*continued from previous page*

as we walked home towards midnight on pavements equally white with frost and populated by occasional reeling drunks navigating their beery cheerful passage home, giving us soporific mumbling "Good nights", at each of which my father would urge us "Say good night, say good night" in case beery contentment should suddenly turn bellicose.

There was then a feeling of a sort of gentle imprisonment about Christmas Day, a sort of hallowed shroud under which excitement bubbled soundlessly, eager to get out but never quite achieving liberation. Invariably, after the gargantuan feast of midday, my elders slept and never, never could I understand why. My excitement was forever too sharp for sleep. Awake among so many snoozing bodies, by a big log fire, I found the afternoon long and tedious, a boring vacuum in which I dared utter no word, even a whisper.

BOXING DAY brought liberation; the shroud was lifted. Immediately after breakfast the day's ritual began with something that I suppose never happens today, or at least hardly ever. In those days every street, or almost every street, had its bakehouse. Great cavernous black ovens housed loaves which were dexterously slid out with long-handled wooden shovels known as *peels*. When these ovens were at last empty after the night's hand-baking and the fires damped down, they were perfect for roasting Sunday's roast beef or Christmas turkeys.

So off we went, my father and I, to the bakehouse round the corner, he bearing the turkey in its big baking pan, I trotting on behind with as much pride as if I had raised the bird myself. I rather fancy you paid a penny to have the Sunday joint cooked and threepence for the turkey. Never was money better spent or better value given. There is some magic about a big coal-fired bakehouse that electricity and gas can never give. Both beef and bird and, of course, Yorkshire pudding, were food of the gods.

You may perhaps think that after another gargantuan feast enriched by second and even third helpings of turkey and the luscious riches of plum pudding we would be singularly reluctant, indeed incapable, of eating for another day. Not so. Stomachs were made of sterner stuff in those days. By four o'clock we were feeling decidedly peckish; so much so in my case that I was ever eager to take up the duties of parlourmaid and help set the table as fast as possible.

If the dinner table had groaned under its weight of succulent fare, the tea table now creaked *and* groaned. Christmas cake, caraway cake, buns, biscuits, crumpets, mince-pies, pears stewed with cloves, apricots and pineapple with cream cheese (to eat with both Christmas cake and celery), butter (to spread on crumpets and, luxury of luxuries, on the caraway cake), three sorts of bread-and-butter, brown and white and a third called dough-cake, which had currants and sultanas in it, jams and jellies and prunes, chocolate and sponge cake with raspberry jam in it, trifle also with raspberry jam in it, lemon curd and honey in the comb.

If this list strikes you as being very like something cooked up by Ma Larkin you are not very far from the truth. All it appears to need to complete it is a plate of Pop Larkin's bloater-paste sandwiches. Unfortunately, or fortunately, bloater-paste sandwiches were never, with us, served at Christmas or indeed any other time.

The table having already borne the burden of two gigantic meals very soon had to prepare itself for another: supper. Having existed in a state of semi-starvation all day we were now prepared for further slight refreshment. Nothing heavy, mark you, merely of a degree of essential sustenance. Cold turkey, cold ham, cheeses, celery, salads, pork pie. And when I say pork pie I mean pork pie: pie of a succulence such as your modern pinked-up tasteless mockery, looking and tasting as if it were made out of stale bread crusts and dog's meat, can never match.

ALL this happened more than half a century ago. It took Hitler and another war to lift the curtain from new and stranger scenes of Christmas. From these later Christmasses I recall nothing of moonlight. They abide through snow and—this you may scarcely believe—crocuses. One particular snow is a mountainous memory. I see it as a piece of giant sculpture—great folds lapping over hedgerows, huge white whales in dykes. In one of these we prodded with poles in a frantic search for our lost postman. He was found happily sleeping it off in a neighbouring cottage.

By contrast we had many a Christmas that was more like Spring. To these the crocuses added their own special lustre. As my garden in Kent began to take shape in the nineteen-thirties, these winter crocuses were among the first things I planted. Every year since, unfailingly, they have begun to bloom in the first week of

*please turn to page 24*

# HEALTHY LIVING

**BY JOAN WILLIAMS SRN, SCM**

## Christmas baby

Christmas began with a baby. It's what the feasting's all about. And for me Christmas will always very specially mean babies, because of two memories which return with amazing clarity each time this season approaches.

The first is the memory of bringing my baby daughter home from hospital on Christmas Day.

The second memory takes me back several years, to the time when I was working as a District Midwife.

This Christmas, the midwife in the next area and her two pupils got together with my two and myself, and we planned a feast to end all feasts. She was a marvellous cook (I wasn't) so we pooled the work. I shopped and coped with the preliminaries. She was going to cook dinner.

"Thank heavens there are no babies due just now," she remarked lightly on Christmas Eve. "With a bit of luck we'll be able to get the morning visits over and then really relax." As an experienced midwife she should have known that was all that was needed to set the January-due babies stirring in their comfy nests!

Sure enough, at eight o'clock next morning I had a 'phone call. "Sorry," said my colleague, "we've had a call. I'll let you know later how things are going."

Not much later, the 'phone rang again. A very apologetic male voice at the other end: "Sister, I'm sorry, but could you come. The wife says she's started."

Mrs. X wasn't due until New Year's Day. She already had two young daughters. That Christmas morning they woke early, in great excitement, opened their presents, and then got ready for church. It couldn't happen in a more appropriate place, I suppose, in church, on Christmas morning, celebrating the birth of a Babe. Mrs. X went into labour.

My pupil and I arrived at her home to find the husband in a flat spin. Fortunately, all the baby things were ready, so we left him to occupy the children and attended to his wife. She, too, was most apologetic. And worried. "The turkey," she said despairingly. "It should be in the oven by now."

I'd never cooked a Christmas dinner in my life, but what else could I do? Nurse sat with Mrs. X; I repaired to the kitchen, found a maternity-sized clean overall, and got cooking. The family had dinner promptly at 2 p.m. I believe they enjoyed it. By then Mrs. X, nurse and I were too busy to worry about such mundane things as dinners.

The baby took its time—I was actually able to slip out and listen to the Queen's Speech. Then promptly at 3.30 p.m. daughter No. 3 was born.

I shall never forget the look on the faces of the two elder children, nor their parents, as their own special Christmas Day baby lay tucked up in her cot.

But what a blessing everything had been prepared in good time. Can you imagine the confusion, on Christmas Day of all days, if the baby clothes hadn't been sorted out, the cot made up, the room prepared?

For the majority of babies simply do not come to time. They may be anything up to two weeks late, as mine was, or anything up to two weeks early. So it's always as well to be prepared. And if it's Christmas time, then it's doubly important, otherwise unexpected labour could throw a family into chaos.

I would suggest, then, that any expectant mother whose baby is due any time between December 11 and January 8, should make absolutely certain that all is ready a good two weeks before Christmas. If the baby is to be born at home, have the room arranged and ready, the cot made up, the baby clothes and all equipment ready to hand.

If you're going to hospital, have your suitcase ready, a note of the hospital and ambulance 'phone number, and clear-cut arrangements made for someone to look after the family while you're away. And do make sure these arrangements cover an unexpected Christmas birth, especially if you have other children. For then their joy will be unspoiled. And your own bit of Christmas will be a very welcome gift.

*Nurse Williams writes about "Keep your Baby Safe" in the January issue of MOTHER, on sale December 18, price 15p.*

**NEXT WEEK: A case of scarlet fever**

*continued from page 22*

December. At one touch of Christmas sun the buds break and become wide, delicate mauve stars with eyes of brilliant orange. Even snow cannot wreck them. It blankets them securely and then, having melted, reveals them unscathed, more delicate and precious than ever. People who know neither my garden nor the crocuses are inclined to treat all this with scepticism. I can only assure them that the crocuses' birth-rate is as regular and certain as the Christmas Day they grace so happily.

THERE is one Christmas—I think the first of the war—totally unlike any other before or since. Not only is it also touched with snow, but with a singular sadness. My own four children were then still small, one at least too small to know what the pillow-case at the foot of his cot was there for. Nor could the others have grasped the full significance of the little gathering that sat down to tea, in the light of trembling Christmas candles, that day. Nor could they know that the bursting Christmas crackers seemed to their father an ominous symbol. It sounded to him exactly like the echo of machine-gun fire.

But at least five people at that table had cause to bless the sound of crackers and the flickering light of candles. Three were Czechs—a young couple scarcely able to speak a word of English, and their baby son. They had fled their country just before the lights went out. The others were a German woman and her little daughter. The father was already in a concentration camp. All this was, for me, so much touched with sadness that I searched my mind for some way of quickly alleviating it. Music, it seemed to me, was the answer and Dvorak was surely the name. If my aim had been to deepen rather than disperse the sadness, I could scarcely have chosen better. As the strains of those intensely national notes from Czechoslovakia broke over the tea table, I looked up and saw the young Czech couple openly weeping. I knew then where their hearts were.

No scene of Christmas has ever struck me so forcibly. I have known gayer ones, happier ones, noisier ones, more bucolic ones, but never one so poignant. And if, more than thirty years later, I find Christmas still touched with a certain sadness that brings tears to my own eyes, I don't doubt that the cause stems largely from that day when we entertained the disinherited to the sound of Dvorak's music, by the light of candles.

Nor am I ashamed of those tears. They are tears of gratitude.

# "ONE CHRISTMAS

## Harry Secombe

**craters and Katy**

"I won't forget the Christmas of 1942; neither will any other soldier who, like me, spent it carrying ammunition through deep mud-filled craters in Tunisia. And for Christmas dinner we had bully beef stew—no afters. But my most *memorable* Christmas? Ah, that was in 1968 when my fourth child, Katy, was born; and it suddenly hit me that we now had *four* lots of presents to buy!"

## Sandie Shaw

**one way to get warm!**

"It was icy and snowy. Jeff and I were huddled together for warmth. It was our first Christmas together, we'd just moved into a new flat—and the electricity hadn't been connected. Jeff finally said: 'It's so cold here, let's go out.' But I couldn't find anything nice to wear. So Jeff suggested we went round to his shop (clever of me to fall for a fashion designer, wasn't it?) and borrow something. When we did, there was the shop *ablaze*. What with helping to fight the flames and making tea for the firemen, we were soon having our warmest Christmas ever!"

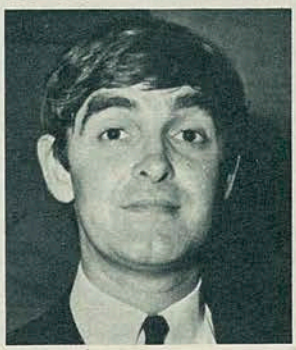
## Peter Cushing

**a very precious memory**

"I know I'll never forget last Christmas. I knew my dear wife Helen was very, very ill; but we'd decided to accept an invitation to spend Christmas in Norfolk. And a friend most kindly offered to drive us there, so that I could be with my wife in the back of the car. But after we arrived, we learned the whole village—including our host—had gone down with 'flu. I was so worried Helen might catch it; but by that time our friend was already driving back to London. I telephoned him in very great distress (there was no alternative transport)—and do you know he drove all the way back in the early hours to take us home! That's unforgettable kindness, isn't it? And my wife and I spent a very quiet but wonderful last Christmas together by ourselves."

## Derek Nimmo

**too much mini-merriment!**



"Christmas to me is hugely enjoyable. We Nimmos start preparing for it way back in July, when we comb the sales for presents. Then about ten days before December 25 we all pile into the car and go off to buy the tree. It has to be tall, so that I can make my annual joke about whether I should cut it down or bore a hole in the ceiling! But this Christmas will be different: I'm out here in Australia with *Charlie Girl* and my family are at home, so memories are doubly dear. One Christmas I'll never forget was some years ago when Pat and I were living in a caravan in a car park off London's Edgware Road; and there was a band of seventeen German midgets—appearing in the same Christmas show as I was—parked all around. After the show opened, we all traipsed back to the park. And as I had the biggest caravan, I played lord of the manor and invited all the midgets in for standard-size drinks—my Big Mistake! In thirty seconds, we had a caravan full of tiny tipsies. Still, when they're *that* size, it's fairly easy to support 'em home."