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CHRISTMAS IN HOSPITAL

DON'T ever spend Christmas in hospital if you can avoid it. Somehow or another Christmas doesn't seem to come down a corridor or in through a window, it comes to us from the skies.

I didn't expect that I would spend Christmas in hospital as a result of an urgent operation, but so it was. I came in to the Kent and Canterbury Hospital for an ordinary check up and to my distaste I found that it was a matter for an operation. Normally speaking I am not nervous of operations and I was hoping to be home for Christmas. This is New Year and I am still here. They found, after some prodding and investigation, that I was suffering from an umbilical hernia. I knew that I had been bleeding internally for a while and had lost a lot of blood but I didn't think it was anything really serious. I thought it was a matter of cauterising a certain element and drying it up. Anyhow, the surgeon operated. I didn't know until afterwards that I was three and a half hours under anaesthetic and they had to give me three pints of blood. I came down from the operating theatre with my lungs as dry as the desert sand and I came out of the anaesthetic to hear them discussing the best way to improve my breathing. I am glad they didn't decide on tubes but voted for breathing exercises. That was more than three weeks ago. I really did feel like a dying fish in the bottom of a barrel; but I improved and last week they came along and took a few of the stitches out. It was nice to see them poring over my tummy saying, 'that one can come out and that one can come out, but I would leave that one a while—I think these can come out as well.'

Then they went away, came back three or four days later and said, 'Well, everything seems to be alright' then they took the rest of the stitches out, popped me into a bath, soaked me well, dried me off, bandaged me up again and here I am, thanks be to God, with no ill consequences of the effort.

However, it was a lonely Christmas. I have vivid memories of Christmas in many countries. In my boyhood in Ireland everyone got up in the early dark, the cows were milked, the chores were done and then the whole family set out for early Mass and Holy Communion. We used to light three candles in each window in the front of the house and did over the doorway and to us children it was a wonderful sight equal to Regent Street itself. Someone had to stay at home and look after the house so that the candles would not burn it down and sometimes the job fell to me, I didn't let on that it was a real joy. When all were gone away, over the road, around the bend and up the hill, they would turn to look back at the lights in the windows; they didn't look as big as they should, they were not as pretty as they could have been, but they were lights in honour of the Christ Child.

Then it was time to get my breakfast, no porridge that day but plenty of good strong tea, sweet cake and barn brack. One year I found the ends of a bottle of whisky and I tried a little of that in my tea—I must say it did change matters a bit—I kept away from everybody else all day in case they smelled it on me. Then after breakfast I would wander over to the gate about a hundred yards away and

look at the candles before coming back to put them out because the day had come. That day was, of course, one day in the year when you kept your Sunday best on all day because nobody could sit down at the dinner of the Christ Child except in whatever finery he had. Then in the evening time, far too early, we were packed off to bed and we wrung each others noses and pulled each other's ears until somebody came up and told us to be quiet. And that was the way Christmas always went—to come again.

As a student I remember Christmas's in Rome and somehow or another they didn't feel like Christmas at all. There was no roast turkey, there was no plum pudding; there didn't seem to be any holly or ivy. Little glasses of wine, green and yellow, and it didn't do us any good, but there always seemed to be plenty of it around. It would come out of back pockets or from under pillows and there was more trouble finding the glasses than the treat was worth.

We used to go round the cribs and they really were something. I remember the one in Aracoeli (the Bow of Heaven) right bang in the middle of ancient Rome. It was the church where the children preached their little sermons in honour of the Christ Child surrounded and applauded by every possible relation that could be found. Yes, that really was Christmas for them. Then we used to look at the cribs down in the great parish churches, some of them austere and very classical, others of a magnificence and splendour that we could hardly imagine. We all knew that Christ was born on the edge of the desert, so did the Italians; and so it was, but around that little edge of desert to which you could walk up a path, was Mary and the Christ Child and the Star of Bethlehem and of course the faithful Joseph and spreading all around—I really didn't know how they managed it—was the whole Italian countryside all picked out in little figures, none of them more than five inches high and the great majority only two or three

inches high, but resplendent in colour. The windmill with its sails twisting on the hillside, the miller and his daughter in spite of the occasion still grinding the corn at the mill.

The blacksmith at the door of his forge swinging his hammer on the anvil; the sheep grazing in the fields and the shepherds camped on the hills. There were donkeys and mules and dogs and of course there were Roman soldiers in armour, both mounted and on foot. Pilgrims made their way by all roads towards the stable of Bethlehem. Sometimes a little mechanical toy or a music box would sound out "Come to the Manger" or "Silent Night" and we always found that the box was hidden in a little grove of pine trees somewhere at the side where it was easy to get at. What a multitude of things these cribs contained, built up after centuries of effort and care. Most of the figures were carved from wood somewhere in the Italian mountains, then coloured in native fashion. Always their heads were too big for them and somehow or another the hats were made of felt and cloaks were made of felt. Boots and other toggery were all genuine. One of these famous cribs is preserved in a museum in Rome and it is a joy to behold. We grew to love these cribs. Every day the scene changed. The three wise men started out on their journey and every day they got a little nearer. Then the Epiphany came and the gifts they brought were shown to the people. How very much we loved these cribs. I remember in coming home to Ireland that we had no real idea of what the crib should be. Those monstrous life size figures of the beasts of the manger and Joseph and Mary and the Holy Child looked completely out of place. The cow had always lost her horn or it had been glued back on and you could see where the job had been inexpertly done. It was always a brown cow and well chipped at points of contact. Poor St. Joseph. I used to marvel at the way he held out leaning on his staff down on one knee.

Then I have seen Christmas in

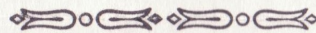
Austria and in Poland between the wars and of course I have seen the French cribs, but I do not like them so well as the Italians. Sometime I would like to tell you the story of the French cribs, but not to-night.

During this Christmas I thought of how Christmas had changed over the half century that has gone by in my life time. Has it changed? Yes, indeed it has. The simplicity has gone out of it—the pure spiritual joy of Christmas we no longer feel. The very smallest shop could turn out Christmas decorations that would turn our candles into a joke, but then we didn't have electric light, nor indeed did we want it. Is there more of Christmas around now, or less of it? I think that there is more of it and a danger of over coverage. Certainly it has become commercialised, it has become a shopping spree, but it has changed in other ways too. I remember how between the wars we were astonished to find the crib as a centrepiece in a Woolworth's store or even in a win-

dow display, we said to each other it couldn't have happened twenty years ago. Here and there over the countryside some public authority would make a gesture of showing a Christmas crib, sometimes against the wish of many and one would hear voices recalling popishness, but now the crib has been accepted everywhere and by everyone, even by those who are not Christian. There was a time when Christmas was banned in Scotland; it didn't sit comfortably upon the spirit of Old Black John (Knox) so he abolished Christmas and instead held Hogmanay. It became a day dedicated to drinking of Scotch which is one way of keeping out the Scotch mist, but now Christmas has swung right back, even at the kirk, and Hogmanay is just a day when Christmas is over.

May it long be with us to preside in our devotions over the last days of the failing year to bring us a blessing on the year to be born.

May I wish you good health, good fortune and every blessing in 1966.



THE WISDOM OF THE RABBI

A TALKER on the B.B.C. morning religious programme told a story which is I think instructive to us all. It is not copyright because I have heard it years ago. It is one of those stories that comes up again and again as occasion demands and points a moral that is sempiternal to all ages. This is how I recall the old version.

I am not sure of details; but at one time, and even now amongst orthodox Jews, a Jewish boy or girl was bound by religious principles to marry within their own race and within their own faith. Any infringement of this rule meant alienation from the family and from the race.

It so happened that a boy belonging to a strict Jewish family went to his father and said, "I have decided to marry." The father said, "Bless you my son, I hope you have found a suitable partner." "That is the trouble," said the son, "She is a Gentile and a Christian." The father

said, "That is a great sorrow to me because you will live to her and die to me and to us." The ritual was to hold a burial service over the defecting boy or girl's bed, the result of which was exile from the family and complete unknowing.

The boy married the girl and passed into oblivion as regards his family. Later the father heard that his son had become a father and he was consumed with desire to see his grandson. He couldn't do it according to strict regulation so he brought his story to the Rabbi. The Rabbi listened and after a few minutes of silence he said to his friend, "You have come to me because I am the Rabbi. Well, the same thing has happened to me and to whom could I go but to God. After my confession to Him there was a silence, then I heard Him say—I, too, had a son who defied the laws of Jewry. They called it the Crucifixion."

THANKS

Grateful thanks to the Sacred Heart, Divine Infant of Prague, Our Lady and St. Jude for great favour received. N. O'Leary, Abingdon

Thanks to St. Martha for favours received. P. Brennan, Portsmouth

Heartfelt thanks to St. Jude for great favour. M. Foley, Co. Kerry

Thanksgiving to Fr. Titus Brandsma for favour received. M. McLoughlin
Grateful thanks.

Mrs. McParlane, Glasgow

Thanks to St. Martha for the seemingly impossible and for doing it so handsomely. Vladimir Radonicich

Grateful thanks for so many favours received. M. Thompson

Grateful thanks to Our Blessed Lady and to St. Jude. F. H. Gollcher

Grateful thanks to Our Lady, St. Joseph and St. Jude for many favours.

M. Green

Thanks to St. Martin de Porres, for favour received. M. Savage

Thanksgiving to Sacred Heart, St. Jude, St. Martin for favours received.

M. E. Ruddy

Grateful thanks to The Sacred Heart and St. Jude. P. Walsh, Barking
Grateful thanks to St. Jude.

H. B. Kanturk, Co. Cork

Thanks St. Jude for my eldest son passing his exam. A. M. Magennis

Grateful thanks to St. Jude for prayers answered. Mrs. Wilding

Grateful thanks to the Divine Infant of Prague, Our Lady and St. Jude.

I. Clarke, Co. Donegal

Grateful thanks to Our Lady and numerous Saints for favours received.

B. McLoughlin, Baylough

Grateful thanks to The Sacred Heart, Divine Infant of Prague and Our Lady. C. Crooks

For favours received through St. Jude's Intercession and the Sacred Heart and St. Joseph.

M. Vallior, Guildford

OUR COMING NOVENAS

OUR LADY OF LOURDES	-	-	-	Feb. 3rd — Feb. 11th
ST. JOSEPH AND ST. PATRICK	-	-	-	Mar. 10th — Mar. 19th
ST. JUDE	-	-	-	Apr. 14th — Apr. 22nd

OUR BURSES

When a Burse reaches the sum of £1,000 or over, £1,000 is invested and the Burse carries on with the remaining balance.

	<i>Already acknowledged</i>	<i>Increase</i>
The St. Jude Burse No. 4	583 7 6	624 5 0
Holy Child of Prague Burse No. 2	682 13 6	686 13 6
Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Burse ...	597 3 6	600 8 6
Our Lady of Lourdes Burse ...	215 0 0	220 0 0
Immaculate Conception B.V.M. Burse	192 4 6	196 9 6
Little Flower Burse	956 5 0	976 15 0
Sacred Heart Burse	90 12 6	94 17 6
St. Anthony Burse	77 2 6	84 2 6
St. Joseph Burse No. 2	52 4 6	53 6 6
Holy Souls Burse	35 9 6	45 9 6
St. Martin de Porres Burse	18 11 0	23 11 0
St. Martha	4 15 0	42 15 0
Father Titus Brandsma	58 7 6	61 7 6
Father Cyril of the Mother of God	29 0 0	30 0 0

Our Lady keep you! Yours in Carmel *M. E. Lynch O.C.*