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CHRISTMAS AMONG THE ORPHANS

*Toys For The Little
Poles at Pahiatua*

CHRISTMAS time is children's time. It is the climax of the year for them, the fulfilment of their dreams. And this is how it should be for the celebrations of the Christ Child. In every home where children live an echo of that ancient wonder rings in their joy and laughter. But once upon a time, a child who was an orphan or homeless was automatically denied these just dues of childhood. Christmas Day was one dreary day in a dreary year. To-day, thanks to far-sighted organisers and public donations, Christmas comes to the orphanages with its full trail of pomp and glory. There is a brimming pillow-case for every child. *The Listener* visited one orphanage for a Christmas story, and this orphanage may be taken as typical of any of such homes for children in New Zealand to-day.

"Our Christmas preparations start early," said the matron, "a month before, at least, though all through the year toys are arriving, which we store away in the box-room. Our Christmas activities cover holidays as well, for we try to arrange a trip away for each child. So as soon as the money starts coming in, we start planning. We have to pay train fares and sometimes board. The children go to Guide camps, City Mission camps, youth conferences, and so on, and quite a few are placed in private homes in the country, or at the seaside. You can imagine the amount of organising all this takes. Then of course all their clothes have to be overhauled for their visits. But the children don't go away till after Christmas Day, for we like to keep our family together for that day."

THE "family" at this moment was away at school, and the Home was stretching itself in the sunlight, conscious of its well-ordered interior. The

beds were made, the dormitories tidied. In the bathroom tooth-brushes and towels hung in rows, in the store-room dozens of shoes were piled up (shoe repairing is a big item). Out from the kitchen floated warm dinner scents. Zero hour is 12.7 p.m. But these were all-the-year-round activities. As well, comes Christmas.

"About a month ago, we began fishing out odd pieces of silks, old Christmas cards, pictures, all sorts of odds-and-ends," the matron was saying, "and the children started making Christmas presents. We also give every child a little pocket money from the Christmas funds, perhaps half-a-crown for the little ones and five shillings for the older ones, and take them to town in batches to buy presents for their relations and for one another. That is always an exciting time, because they don't go shopping very often. Christmas activities open for us here with a Christmas concert and tea given by one of the schools. Everything is arranged for us, including the bus transport, and the school children raise the money beforehand by sales of work and concerts. This outing sets the Christmas fun really rolling. Then come other parties given by different organisations, a trip to the pictures, ice-cream for everyone. The exams are over by this time, and the excitement is mounting every day."

THE matron was twinkling with pleasure herself by this time, and the shining floors winked back.



A rocking-horse can make even a little Polish refugee forget what he has been through.



Polish children at Pahiatua. The toys are much appreciated.

"Three days before Christmas the whole place is decorated throughout," she was saying, "and of course all the children help with this. By this time we generally have the presents more or less sorted out, and that's no easy job. Each child has to be considered separately, and a suitable present chosen. Our shopping expeditions at this time are numerous and rather hectic. Presents are also pouring in from many sources by now. Sunday schools, clubs, etc., send in all kinds of things."

"The older girls over 12 are each given a special present by different outside organisations—a dress length, perhaps, or a good pair of stockings, something really good. Then there are writing sets, stamp collections; we have to choose to suit each individual personality. We never need to buy books, for good ones are always sent in. But we buy well-illustrated Bibles and prayer-books for the children. All these Christmas festivities, by the way, including the whole of the holiday period, the picnics and outings and trips away, are paid for by public donations. We don't touch a penny of the general funds. The cheques which come in are wonderful."

ON Christmas Eve then, the scene is set. The time is 11.30 p.m., and half-a-dozen adults are creeping round laden with toys. Father Christmas hasn't come down the chimney. In a good many cases he has come through the post, but each child lies dreaming of sleigh bells and of a star that shines brightly. The adults creep round stifling their giggles in case something rattles or drops. They fill the cases by the light of the moon—a good gift and a dozen or so oddments—sweets, soap, toothbrushes, colouring books, small toys, combs, all kinds of things for each child. The presents are all new, but into the top of each pillow-case they stick a funny old toy as a joke. The children sleep on, but at half-past four they are awake. They are diving for their pillow-cases. They are squealing with joy. Fifty children are rushing round with their presents. They pile into the matron's room. Everyone must see their presents, see this one, see that one. This is the best Christmas yet.

"BUT of course the real meaning of Christmas is not forgotten," said the matron. "Everything centres round

(continued on next page)