



CHRISTMAS and WAR

Often There Has Been No Peace on Earth, But Sometimes Goodwill



THERE are two good reasons why Christmas is for Christian men the season of peace, and of these the better known is not perhaps the more powerful. Christmas is the season of peace—or at any rate of peaceful thoughts—because it is the feast of the Prince of Peace; but it is also the season of peace for the very good reason that at that time of the year in the civilised upper half of the globe it is generally much too cold to fight. So in past ages, well before Christmas, the warriors “went into winter quarters” and collected great stores of food and drink and licked their wounds and replenished their supplies and waited for fighting weather. Up to quite recent times there is no record that I can find of a great battle being fought on Christmas Day.

But, if there has been little fighting, there has been plenty of misery. Those Roman legionaries at the outposts on the Rhine and Danube never got leave for Christmas; it was during Christmas week in the fateful year 406 that the German tribes gathered on the bank of the Rhine, preparing to pour across into the rich province of Gaul, and very cold they must have found it, as they loaded their rafts and pushed them out from the shore; but on they went. And the bleak Christmas winds that swept across the Russian steppes and the plain of Hungary did little to deter Attila's tribesmen or the hordes of Genghis Khan. Winter quarters in a strange continent can never have been precisely gay. Ancient, medieval or modern, winter is winter still.

It was just before Christmas that the miserable remnant of Napoleon's army escaped from the snows of Russia and staggered westward across the windswept plain of Northern Europe. No fighting, but no comfort either for them at Christmas. Nor were things much better for that dreadful Christmas that the British and French troops spent outside the walls of Sebastopol in 1855. If it was possible for things to be worse, perhaps they were worse in the bogged trenches of Flanders in 1917. No, there is not much fun in warfare in the middle of winter.

Hands Across the Trenches

What is very astonishing is that, so strong is the spirit of Christmas, that everywhere, in whatever circumstances of wet and cold and horror and inhumanity, Western men's thoughts do turn to Christmas, and sometimes for an hour or two they put their weapons down and hold out friendly hands to their enemies and smile and smoke and swap addresses and pictures of wives and children, and think the thoughts of ordinary men.

This at any rate is what happened in France on that first Christmas Day of the first World War. “At 8.30 a.m.,” says an account, “I saw four Germans leave their trenches and come towards us . . . They were three private soldiers

and a stretcher-bearer, and their spokesman started off by saying that he thought it only right to come over and wish us a happy Christmas . . . (After half-an-hour's talk) we parted after an exchange of Albany cigarettes and German cigars and I went straight to Headquarters to report. On my return at 10 a.m., I was surprised to hear a hell of a din going on and not a single man left in my trenches . . . I heard strains of ‘Tipperary’ floating down the breeze, swiftly followed by a tremendous burst of Deutschland uber Alles and . . . I saw to my amazement not only a crowd of about 150 British and Germans . . . but six or seven such crowds all the way down our lines . . . Meanwhile Scots and Huns were fraternising in the most genuine possible manner. Every sort of souvenir was exchanged, addresses given and received, photos of families shown, etc. One of our fellows offered a German a cigarette; the German said, ‘Virginian?’ Our fellow said, ‘Aye, straight cut,’ and the German, ‘No thanks, I only smoke Turkish!’ (After the Germans had sung

a marching song and the Scots had replied with The Boys of Bonny Scotland) we went on, singing everything from Good King Wenceslas down to the ordinary Tommies' songs and ended up with Auld Lang Syne, in which we all, English, Scots, Irish, Prussians, Wurtembergers, etc., all joined.”

Then a hare started up and all joined in a wild chase; and then an officer turned up with a bottle of rum, “the proper stuff,” which was polished off “before you could say knife.” There was more chasing in the afternoon and towards evening all joined in collecting dead bodies and burying them.

The next day the war was resumed. “There was an attempt,” says the Official History, “to repeat this custom of old warfare at Christmas, 1915, but it was a small and isolated one, and the fraternisation of 1914 was never repeated”—which seems a pity.

Of a Different Kind

In the collected works of that promising young American poet, Joyce Kilmer,

who is buried at the edge of a little copse beside the Ourcq with a German bullet in his brain, there is a very moving story of fraternisation of a rather different kind on Christmas Eve between three American soldiers and a simple French peasant woman and her child. They also exchanged pictures and food and drink and sang songs. They began with Sweet Rosie O'Grady and Take Me Back to New York Town and ended up with Mother Machree; “and Sergeant Riley obliged with a reel—in his socks—to an accompaniment of whistling and handclapping.” And then, upon being requested to respond, Madame and the little Solange sang a couple of Latin hymns. “But during the final stanza, Madame did not sing. She leant against the great family bedstead and looked at us. She had taken up one of the babies and held him to her breast. One of her red and toil-scarred hands half covered his fat little back. There was a gentle dignity about that plain, hard-working woman, that soldier's widow—we all felt it and some of us saw the tears in her eyes . . . ‘I tell you, Joe,’ said Sergeant Reilly, afterwards, as they lay on the floor, smoking a last cigarette, ‘it's 40 years since I heard a hymn sung in a kitchen, and it was my mother—God rest her—that sang them. I sort of realise what we're fighting for now, and I never did before. It's for women like that and their kids.’” Which is perhaps as good a reason as there is for warlike thoughts at Christmas—though doubtless King Herod would not have understood it.

It Was No Joke

But things were not always like this. It was no joke being in the middle of the Atlantic for Christmas, even if you had the luck to escape the German torpedoes; and it was no joke for those gallant troops, so indifferently led, who surrendered at Kut-el-Amara in the summer of 1916 and were driven slowly across towards the Mediterranean. Captain Yeats-Brown saw a group of them, just before Christmas, “moribund on the barrack square at Mosul.” Nothing in the annals of war can be much more horrible than the treatment they received at the hands of the Turk. Seventy per cent of them never saw England again. For the rank and file, one of the survivors tells us, “Christmas came and went without notice.” They were past noticing. But the officers were better treated; and in one place at any rate rigged up an altar and draped it with a flag that they had made and held a service and sang the Christmas hymns and finished up the day with a concert.

What a War! What a World!

In the second World War things have been somewhat different. More perhaps than in any war that preceded it, in Europe at any rate, this has been a winter war. By the second December the blitz was over but the bombers were still coming; the Navy was still at sea



THE SIXTH CHRISTMAS. From a drawing in the “Radio Times” by C. W. Bacon.

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