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and the convoys were still at their hazardous job; in the Western Desert Wavell was in the thick of his great offensive. By the third Christmas the Germans were at the gates of Moscow and the Japanese had given the Americans a terrible blow at Pearl Harbour and were moving down towards Singapore. By the fourth Christmas the face of things had changed: the 8th Army had driven the Germans into Tunisia, terrific raids on German cities were destroying German war industries, the Russians were advancing, things were moving in the South Pacific, and it might safely be said that the tide had turned.

And now as our sixth Christmas approaches, the end seems to be in sight. What a war! What a world! Never, it would seem, has the continent of Europe, at any rate, been the scene of greater misery. Armies have been destroyed, great cities have been blown to pieces and whole populations torn from their homes and driven into strange lands. Mere misery is piled up mountains high.

That First Christmas

Christmas, it would seem, and the spirit of Christmas can hardly have much meaning in a world so scarred and tormented by war. And yet it was in just such a world that that Christmas story first was acted! The



"... That dreadful Christmas outside the walls of Sebastopol."

"Our Boss, 'E Gives Us Strawberries"

THERE is bosses wot gives their stauffs 'ell, an' stauffs wot gives their bosses ditto. But our boss, 'e gives us strawberries.

Every year, rhand abaht Christmas-time, the gel wot brings us our mornin' an' arfternoon tea brings us a saucerful of strawberries each. From the boss.

There is nearly a 'undred of us. But we each gets a saucerful.

Luvly strawberries they are. Strite from 'is garding. Me mouf waters w'en I thinks of them.

Any day now the gel wot brings us our mornin' an' arfternoon tea'll be bringin' us our strawberries.

I remember 'ow surprised I was the first time she brings them in. I was a new chum then.

"Ere," she says. "'Ere's yer strawberries, Tommy." An' she sets the bloomin' saucerful in front of me. Blimey, I was that taken aback I didn't know wot 'er say. I thinks she's milkin gime of me.

Jewish people to whom the Christ-child came were not a nation of tailors and moneylenders, renowned for their meekness, but a tough and turbulent people renowned for their warlike qualities. A modern historian, Edwyn Bevan, compares them with Dervishes and Afghans, "peculiarly reckless fighters... terrible to control." A hundred and fifty years before the Gospel story began they had first wrested their independence from the Greeks, after a long and bloody struggle under the Maccabees, and had then turned upon one another. After two generations of civil war the Romans had stepped in (B.C. 63) and put an end to their independence. Where disorder continued, the Roman generals put it down with the usual Roman thoroughness; only a few years before the birth of Jesus the Legate of Syria put a temporary end to trouble by crucifying 2000 rebels for the sake of example. But worse, far worse, things were to follow. That other crucifixion, on Calvary, was scarcely over when a succession of revolts occurred that ended in the slaughter of Jews by hundreds of thousands.

Such was the world which was the scene of the Gospel story, a world that for hatred and misery and insecurity cannot have been very different from Central Europe to-day. And the hearts and minds of men were not so different either. One day, we are told by a good authority, not long before the end of the Jewish state, a young rabbi sat down on a hill above the city and the tears welled up in his eyes as he looked down on it and he said: "If thou hadst known, even thou, the things which belong unto peace! but now they are hid from thine eyes. For the days shall come upon thee that thine enemies shall cast a trench about thee and compass thee round and keep thee in on every side and shall lay thee even with the ground, and thy children within thee; and they shall not leave in thee one stone upon another, because thou knewest not the time of thy visitation."

And so indeed they did, and so indeed they will until men learn the message of Christmas and "the things that belong unto peace."

"They're from the boss," she says. "The stauff gets them every year. Didn't ye know?"

From the boss! A bleedin' boss givin' me strawberries! Cor!

But there they was, starin' me in the fice, a 'ole bloomin' saucerful of them, strite from 'is garding.

Luvly strawberries they were, glistenin' wif freshness. Big, an' rich, an' juicy.

Me mouf waters w'en I thinks of them.

There was even icin' sugar.

Cor!

There is folks wot might say as 'ow our boss can afford ter give us strawberries, an' that it ain't any 'ardship on 'im ter do this every year, seain' as 'ow 'e 'as a ruddy big garding.

But 'ow many bosses wif gardings twice as big would do wot 'e does for their bleedin' stauff?

A proper gent, our boss is. A proper gent.

Any day now the gel wot brings us our mornin' and arfternoon tea'll be bringin' us our strawberries.

—Tommy

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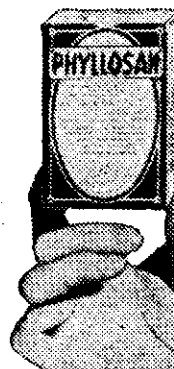
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