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Christmas in New Zealand

THE infection becomes noticeable in the first days of December. It is about then that the shops burst into a sudden splendour. The counterfeit holly, the silver paper and the effigies of Father Christmas are brought up from the basement; and articles which may be no different from those that have been sold throughout the year are made to appear seductive in wrappings of cellophane. In the meantime people have not forgotten that Christmas is coming nearer, but the thought has been little more than a glow in the background, and for the busy ones it has not been even a glow. But now, as the shopkeepers remind them of the approaching anniversary, they begin to think all at once of Christmas cards and of presents for the family. The traffic becomes a little denser in the streets; it is harder than usual to find an empty seat in a tea-room; and all day long the cash registers announce with metallic voices the progress towards another peak in Christmas buying. And now, too, holiday preparations must be made. The wise ones have booked long ago at tourist resorts; but most of us are not wise (or perhaps it is merely that we lack the sublime confidence of those who feel able to plan their lives six months or a year ahead), and the booking offices are filled with hopeful or anxious travellers. Housewives, of course, have other worries of a kind with which they are familiar: they must store up food for the sabbatarian interlude, and there must also be extra cooking if the family is not to be disappointed in its hopes of Christmas eating. In a flurry of buying and spending and planning, the December days move rapidly towards the summit of the year. Afterwards the excitement will ebb into the placid enjoyment of days spent in the sun, for Christmas in New Zealand is the gateway to holiday. Perhaps it is inevitable that in this country it should be easier than elsewhere to forget that we are coming to what is primarily a religious festival. Christmas in Europe is at the beginning of winter, and only for a day or two will the schools and shops and factories be closed. The long holidays come after the middle of the year, in high summer. Our antipodean situation favours the growth of a sentiment in which the Christmas feeling is, for many of us, a little submerged. Yet the churches have a message which belongs to sunlight as well as to the night sky over Bethlehem. It may be true that Christmas cannot be freed from the shadow of Easter, if only in the sense that every birth contains a death; and if the Christian revelation implies suffering and discipline, it implies also the hope which comes from the belief that death has been transcended. At this time of the year, however, it is the birth and the hope which prevail in the Christian mood. For many of us the hope is inarticulate. We are not theologians, and our thinking is somewhat spasmodic outside our practical interests. Perhaps we are even a little pagan in outlook, finding it easy to seek reassurance on the beaches and under the hills, and in the company of our friends. We cannot disentangle all our thoughts, or be entirely truthful about what lies beneath them. But we know that we are in a quiet country, that we have come to a time of the year when we may relax a little from the hurried rhythm of living, and that the fullness of the season is to be found most of all in Christian fellowship. What we do with the season is our own affair, but the opportunities for living it in the spirit of the festival are all around us if we really want them.

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