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ROBERT GRAVES

MY BEST CHRISTMAS

'QUEEN VICTORIA WAS still alive that Christmas, and I was four and a half years old.'

'Who was she exactly? Queen Elizabeth's grandmother?'

'No: great-great-grandmother.'

'Wow ! Do you remember her?'

'Yes: a fat little lady in black riding through the Park with an escort of Lifeguardsmen -- her open barouche drawn by two splendid high-stepping grey horses, and the band playing: "Make way, make way, for the rowdy-dowdy boys".'

'Barouche?'

'Yes: no cars in those days. The streets cobbled, and so filthy with horse-droppings and mud that everyone wore boots. Ragged boys with dirty faces used to sweep the crossings with brooms, and beg for halfpennies. Sometimes they turned cartwheels to attract attention.'

'Wow! How ancient you are! Where did you spend that Christmas?'

'At home, near Wimbledon Common. A big house with twenty-five rooms and a coal cellar. But no electric light or lift, or vacuum cleaner, or refrigerator, or radio, or telly. Only rather dim gas-lamps, and coal fires, and a grand piano.'

'Were Christmas trees invented then?'

'Yes, Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert the Good, brought them in from Germany... We always had a big one in the drawing room. The same coloured glass decorations lasted year after year -- never got broken. Things were made to last in those days and people treated them more carefully... We children always waited outside in the dark, cold hall for an hour or so, telling ghost stories, while Mother and Father dressed the tree and sorted out the presents.'

'Were they hung on the tree?'

'No: each of us had a chair or a sofa or small table, covered with a white linen cloth, and the presents laid out on it. But when at last the door opened and we rushed in and

the tree blazed out at us like the Jewelled Garden of Paradise, we had to join hands first and sing: "O Come All Ye Faithful". Mother accompanied us on the piano with the loud pedal pressed hard down. At the foot of the tree was a Crypt -- with St Joseph and the Virgin and the Christ Child and the ox and ass, and the Three Wise Men. Then Father Christmas knocked at the french window leading to the garden, and came in. He waved his hand at us and told us his reindeer were stabled at the "Swan" just across the road and wished us a happy Christmas. He complained of the cold so much that my father poured him a glass of cherry brandy. He drank it noisily and went out again into the thick fog, shouting: "See you again next century!" That's how I can fix the date: 1899!'

'Tell me about your presents.'

'I got a musical box that played "Home Sweet Home", and two boxes of soldiers -- the Royal Fusiliers and the Egyptian Camel Corps -- and a toy helmet and a toy drum, and a prayer-book in red morocco leather, and a painting book, and a clockwork horse.'

'You're making it up, aren't you?'

'No; I remember the list because soon afterwards I was taken away to a scarlet-fever hospital and my mother had most of my toys burned. The doctor said they were infectious for the baby. But my favourite sister hid the helmet and drum in the tool shed, and used to play with them sadly when her nurse wasn't about.'

'Did you believe in Father Christmas?'

'Yes, until the Mix-up Christmas (I'll tell you about that later), although he wore the same boots as Uncle Charles. But he hadn't such importance in those days as the advertisements have built up now. Christmas wasn't just fun and games. It was Jesus's Birthday, on which we gave one another birthday presents -- a day of thanking God and being especially kind to everyone. We emptied out our money-boxes for the presents. I remember we always used to give the cook and the parlour-maid scented soap, at 2d. a cake... We got a penny a week in those days, and occasional tips from uncles and aunts.'

'A penny a week; sounds sort of stingy... Did you hang up your stockings?'

'We did, and anyone who had been naughty that winter got coal instead of almonds, raisins, apples, tangerines, a negro-teeth puzzle, and white sugar mice with pink eyes and string tails.'

'Wow! Did you often get coal?'

'Never. I was always as good as Prince Albert.'

'Ha, ha! What happened on Christmas Day?'

'We dressed up and went to church, which was decorated with chrysanthemums and holly. But the vicar wouldn't allow mistletoe; he said it was frivolous. Then back to Christmas dinner. The whole family was there: five boys (counting the baby), four girls, and Uncle Charles who couldn't spend Christmas at home because Aunt Alice had left him. Yes, turkey, plum-pudding and mince pies had been invented. In fact our cook had once been cook to General Gordon and used a plum-pudding recipe in his own handwriting.'

'Who was General Gordon?'

'The Dervishes killed him at Khartoum. I once showed you the scene at Madame Tussaud's.'

'Did you? I don't remember. Go on with the story.'

'Then we pulled crackers, and put on coloured caps and asked one another riddles...'

'Such as?'

'Such as: "Why did Kruger wear thick boots?"'

'Who was Kruger?'

'President of the South African Republic. The Boer War had been on for two years that Christmas and every streetboy was whistling the song:

Good bye, Dolly, I must leave you

Though it breaks my heart to go

-- Something tells me I am needed,

At the Front to fight the foe.

But nobody got called up; and it wasn't much of a war. Life went on as usual. Bombs and tanks and planes hadn't been invented yet.'

'But why did Kruger wear thick boots?'

'To keep De Wet off defeat.'

'I don't dig you.'

'De Wet was one of Kruger's generals.'

'Anyhow, what did you do that evening?'

'We went to a special children's service at the Parish Church: cinemas hadn't been invented, you see.'

'Then why was it your best Christmas?'

'Because it was the reallest.'

'Oh!... What's happened to the Wimbledon house?'

'Sold and cut up into six flats... I suppose six small families live in them now, and on Christmas Eve there'll be six tiny Christmas trees lighted -- probably the artificial wire-and grocer's-grass sort that fold up, with a little string of coloured electric light bulbs tied on... And a couple of elderly baby-sitters will be drinking sherry there and listening to the carol-singers on TV, while the young folk go off somewhere to dance.'

'Well, I daresay that's a bit more fun than singing hymns to a grand piano and asking riddles. By the way: if I'm still on your Santa list what I want is a really good set of bongo-drums... Oh, and you had something to say about a Mix-up?'

'Yes, two years later -- when Uncle Charles came in by one door and said he was Father Christmas, and Uncle Bob came in by the other, just after Uncle Charles had gone, and said he was Santa Claus.'

'Wow!'