

A Child's Christmas And Other Dylan Thomas

A 70 minute compilation of the works of Dylan Thomas

Full Tek Script

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A CHILD'S CHRISTMAS IN WALES

PRESHOW

LX 1 (D + HL) & SFX 1

At "Clearance"

LX 2 (B + House 10s) & SFX 2 *Simultaneously*

Actor emerges after 15 secs. Music automatically stops.

INTRODUCTION (*Actor ad libs directly to the audience with the houselights up*)

After introduction (about 1 minute)...

Without further ado... Thankyou (*signals to Technician*)

LX 3 (C & H/L out 10s)

STORY: HOLIDAY MEMORY

August bank holiday. A tune on an ice-cream cornet. A slap of sea and a tickle of sand. An fanfare of sunshades opening. A wince and whinny of bathers dancing into deceptive water. A tuck of dresses. A rolling of trousers. A compromise of paddlers. A sunburn of girls and a lark of boys. A silent hullabaloo of balloons.

I remember the sea telling lies in a shell held to my ear for a whole harmonious, hollow minute by a small, wet girl in an enormous bathing suit marked Corporation Property.

I remember sharing the last of my moist buns with a boy and a lion. Tawny and savage, with cruel nails and capacious mouth, the little boy tore and devoured. Wild as seed cake, ferocious as a hearth-rug, the depressed and verminous lion nibbled like a mouse at his half a bun, and hiccupped in the sad dusk of his cage.

I remember a man like an alderman or a bailiff, bowlered and collarless, with a bag of monkey-nuts in his hand, crying Ride em, cowboy! time and again as he whirled in his chairplane giddily above the upturned laughing faces of the town girls bold as brass and the boys with padded shoulders and shoes sharp as knives; and the monkey-nuts flew through the air like salty hail.

Children all day capered or squealed by the glazed or bashing sea, and the steam-organ wheezed its waltzes in the threadbare playground and the waste lot, where the dodgems dodged, behind the pickle factory. And mothers loudly warned their proud pink daughters or sons to ***put that jellyfish down***; and fathers spread newspapers over their faces; and sand-fleas hopped on the picnic lettuce; and someone had forgotten the salt.

In those always radiant, rainless, lazily rowdy and sky-blue summers departed, I remember August Monday from the rising of the sun over the stained and royal town to the husky hushing of the roundabout music and the dowsing of the naphtha jets in the seaside fair; from bubble-and-squeak to the last of the sandy sandwiches.

There was no need, that holiday morning, for the sluggardly boys to be shouted down to breakfast; out of their jumbled beds they tumbled, scrambled into their rumpled clothes; quickly at the bathroom basin they catlicked their hands and faces, but never forgot to run the water loud and long as though they washed like colliers; in front of the cracked looking-glass bordered with cigarette cards, in their treasure-trove bedrooms, they whisked a gap-tooth comb through their surly hair; and with shining cheeks and noses and tide-marked necks they took the stairs three at a time.

But for all their scramble and scamper, clamour on the landing, catlick and toothbrush flick, hair-whisk and stair-jump, their sisters were always there before them. Up with the lady-lark, they had prinked and fizzed and hot-ironed; and smug in their blossoming dresses, ribboned for the sun, in gym shoes white as the blancod snow, neat and silly with doilies and tomatoes, they helped in the higgledy kitchen. They were calm; they were virtuous; they had washed their necks; they did not romp, or fidget; and only the smallest sister put out her tongue at the noisy boys.

And the woman who lived next door came into the kitchen and said that her mother, and ancient uncertain body, who wore a hat with cherries, was having one of her days and had insisted, that very holiday morning, in carrying, all the way to the tram-stop, a photograph album and the cut-glass fruit-bowl from the front room.

This was the morning when father, mending one hole in the thermos-flask, made three; when the sun declared war on the butter and the butter ran; when dogs, with all the sweet-binned backyards to wag and sniff and bicker in, chased their tails in the jostling kitchen, worried sandshoes, snapped at flies, writhed between legs, scratched among towels, sat smiling on hampers. And if you could have listened at some of the open doors of some of the houses in the street you might have heard:

Uncle Owen says he cant find the bottle opener...

Has he looked under the hallstand?

Willys cut his finger...

Got your spade?

If somebody doesnt kill that dog...

Uncle Owen says why should the bottle-opener be under the hall-stand?

Never again, never again...

I know I put the pepper somewhere...

Willys bleeding!

Look, theres a bootlace in my bucket...

Oh come on, come on...

Let's have a look at the bootlace in your bucket...

If I lay my hands on that dog...

Uncle Owens found the bottle opener...

Willys bleeding over the cheese...

And all the trams that hissed like ganders took us all the beautiful beach.

There was cricket on the sand, and sand in the sponge-cake, sand-flies in the watercress, and foolish, mulish, religious donkeys on the unwilling trot. Girls undressed in slipping tents of propriety; under invisible umbrellas, stout ladies dressed for

the male and immoral sea. Little naked navvies dug canals; children with spades and no ambition built fleeting castles; wispy young men, outside the bathing-huts, whistled at substantial young women, and dogs who desired thrown stones more than the bones of elephants.

Recalcitrant uncles huddled over luke ale in the tiger-striped marquees. Mothers in black, like wobbling mountains, gasped under the discarded dresses of daughters who shrilly braved the goblin waves. And fathers, in the once-a-year sun, took fifty winks. Oh, think of all the fifty winks along the paper bagged sand.

Liquorice allsorts, and Welsh hearts, were melting, and the sticks of rock, that we all sucked, were like barbers poles made of rhubarb. In the distance, surrounded by disappointed theoreticians and an ironmonger with a drum, a cross man on an orange-box shouted that holidays were wrong. And the waves rolled in, with rubber ducks and clerks upon them.

I remember the patient, laborious, and enamouring hobby, or profession, of burying relatives in sand. I remember the princely pastime of pouring sand, from cupped hands or buckets, down collars and tops of dresses; the shriek, the shake, the slap. I can remember the boy by himself, the beachcombing lone-wolf, hungrily waiting at the edge of family cricket; the friendless fielder, the boy uninvited to bat or to tea.

I remember the smell of sea and seaweed, wet flesh, wet hair, wet bathing-dresses, the warm smell as of a rabbity field after rain, the smell of pop and splashed sunshades and toffee, the stable-and-straw smell of hot, tossed, tumbled, dug, and trodden sand, the swill-and-gas-lamp smell of Saturday night, though the sun shone strong; from the bellying beer-tents, the smell of the vinegar on shelled cockles, winkle smell, shrimp smell, the dripping-oily-back-street-winter smell of chips in newspapers, the smell of ships from the sun-dazed docks round the corner of the sand-hills, the smell of the known and paddled-in sea moving, full of the drowned and herrings, out and away and beyond and further still towards the Antipodes that hung their koala-bears and Maoris, kangaroos, and boomerangs, upside down off the backs of the stars.

And the noise of pummeling Punch, and Judy falling, and clock tolling or telling no time in the tenantless town; now and

again a bell from a lost tower, or a train on the lines behind us clearing its throat, and always the hopeless, ravenous swearing and pleading of the gulls, donkey-bray and hawker-cry, harmonicas and toy trumpets, shouting and laughing and singing, hooting of tugs and tramps, the clip of the chair attendants puncher, the motor-boat coughing in the bay, and the same hymn and washing of the sea that was heard in the Bible.

If it could only just, if it could only just? your lips said again and again as you scooped, in the hob-hot sand. dungeons, garages, torture chambers, train tunnels, arsenals, hangars for zeppelins, witches kitchens, vampires parlours, smugglers cellars, trolls grog-shops, sewers, under a ponderous and crackling castle. If it could only just be like this for ever and ever amen.

August Monday all over the earth, from the Mumbles, where the aunties grew like ladies on a seaside tree to brown-bear-hugging Henty-land and the turtled, Ballantyne Islands.

Could donkeys go on the ice?

Only if it got snowshoes.

We snowshoed a meek, complaining donkey and galloped him off in the wake of the ten-foot-tall and Atlas-muscled Mounties, rifled and pemmicanned, who always, in the white Gold Rush wastes, got their black-oathed-and-bearded Man.

Are there donkeys on desert islands?

Only sort-of donkeys.

What dyou mean, sort-of donkeys?

Native donkeys. They hunt things on them!

Sort of walruses and seals and things?

Donkeys cant swim!

These donkeys can. They swim like whales they swim like anything, they swim like...

Liar!

Liar yourself!

And two small boys fought fiercely and silently in the sand, rolling together in a ball of legs and bottoms. Then they went and saw the pierrots, or bought vanilla ices.

Lolling or larrikin, that unsoiled, boiling beauty of a common day, great gods with their braces over their vests sang, spat pips, puffed smoke at wasps, gulped and ogled, forgot the rent, embraced, posed for the dicky-bird, were coarse, had rainbow coloured armpits, winked, belched, blamed the radishes, looked at Ilfracombe, played hymns on paper-and-comb, peeled bananas, scratched, found seaweed in their panamas, blew up paper bags and banged them, wished for nothing.

But over all the beautiful beach I remember most the children playing, boys and girls tumbling, moving jewels, who might never be happy again. And happy as a sandboy is as true as the heat of the sun. **LX 4 (B 10 secs)**

Dusk came down; or grew up out of the sands and the sea; or curled around us from the calling docks and the bloodily smoking sun.

The day was done, the sands brushed and ruffled suddenly with a sea-broom of cold wind. And we gathered together all the spades and buckets and towels, empty hampers and bottles, umbrellas and fish-frails, bats and balls and knitting, and went, ***Oh listen, Dad!*** to the fair in the dusk on the bald seaside field.

Fairs were no good in the day; then they were shoddy and tired; the voices of the hoop-la girls were crimped as elocutionists; no cannon-ball could shake the roosting coconuts; the gondolas mechanically repeated their sober lurch, the Wall of Death was safe as a governess cart; the wooden animals were waiting for the night.

But in the night, the hoop-la girls, like operatic crows, croaked at the coming moon; whizz, whirl, and ten for a tanner, the coconuts rained from their sawdust like grouse from the highland sky; tipsy, the griffin-prowed gondolas weaved on dizzy rails; the Wall of Death was a spinning rim of ruin; and the neighing wooden horses took, to a haunting hunting tune,

a thousand Bechers Brooks as easily and breezily as hooved swallows.

Approaching, at dusk, the fair-field from the beach, we scorched and gritty boys heard, above the belabouring of the batherless sea, the siren voices of the raucous, horsy barkers.

Roll up, roll up!

In her tent and her rolls of flesh, the Fattest Woman in the World sat sewing her winter frock, another tent, and fixed her little eyes, blackcurrants in blancmange, on the skeletons who filed and sniggered by.

Roll up, roll up, roll up to see the Largest Rat on Earth, The Rover or Bonzo of vermin. Here scampered the smallest pony, like a Shetland shrew. And here, The Most Intelligent Fleas, trained, reined, bridled and bitted, minutely cavorted in their glass corral. Round galleries and shies and stalls, pennies were burning holes in a hundred pockets.

Pale young men with larded hair and Valentino-black side-whiskers, fags stuck to their lower lips, squinted along their swivel-sighted rifles and aimed at ping-pong balls dancing on fountains.

In knife-creased, silver-grey, skirt-like Oxford bags, and sleeveless, scarlet, zip-fastened shirt with yellow horizontal stripes, a collier at the strength-machine spat on his hands, raised the hammer, and brought it Thor-ing down. The bell rang for Blaina.

Outside his booth stood a bitten-eared and barndoor-chested pug with a nose like a twisted swede and hair that started from his eyebrows and three teeth, yellow as a camels, inviting any sportsman to a sudden and sickening basting in the sandy ring or a quid if he lasted a round; and, wiry, cocky, bow-legged, coal-scarred, boozed, sportsmen by the dozen strutted in and reeled out; and still those three teeth remained, chipped and camel-yellow, in the bored teak face.

Draggled and stout-wanting mothers with haphazard hats, hostile hatpins, buns awry, bursting bags, and children at their skirts like pop-filled and jam-smeared limpets, screamed before distorting mirrors, at their suddenly tapering or tubular bodies and huge ballooning heads. And the children gaily

bellowed at their own reflected bogies withering and bulging in the glass.

Old men, smelling of Milford Haven in the rain, shuffled, badgering and cadging, round the edges of the swaggering crowd, their only wares a handful of damp confetti.

A daring dash of schoolboys, safely, shoulder to shoulder, with their fathers trilbies cocked at a desperate angle over one eye, winked at and whistled after the procession past the swings of two girls, arm-in-arm: always one pert and pretty, and always one with glasses. Girls in skulled and cross-boned tunnels shrieked, and were comforted. Young men, heroic after pints, stood up on the flying chairplanes, touseled, crimson, and against the rules. Jaunty girls gave sailors sauce.

All the fun of the fair in the hot bubbling night. The Man in the sand-yellow moon over the hurdy of gurdies. The swing-boats swimming to and fro like slices of the moon. Dragons and hippogriffs at the prows of the gondolas breathing fire and Sousa. Midnight roundabout riders tantivvying under the fairy lights, huntsmen on billygoats and zebras hallooing under a circle of glow-worms.

And as we climbed home, up the gas lit hill, to the still homes over the mumbling bay, we heard the music die and the voices drift like sand. And we saw the lights of the fair fade. And, at the far end of the seaside field, they **LX 5 (BO 7s)** lit their lamps, one by one, in the caravans.

Count two in black **LX 6 (C 7s) (AUTO)**

Actor bows, takes drink. Actor Signals

LX 7 (A 7s)

STORY: A VISIT TO GRANDPA'S

In the middle of the night I woke from a dream full of whips and lariats as long as serpents, and runaway coaches on mountain passes, and wide, windy gallops over cactus fields, and I heard the man in the next room crying, **Gee-up!** and **Whoa!** and trotting his tongue on the roof of his mouth.

It was the first time I had stayed in grandpa's house. The floorboards had squeaked like mice as I climbed into bed, and

the mice between the walls had creaked like wood as though another visitor was walking on them. It was a mild summer night, but curtains had flapped and branches beaten against the window. I had pulled the sheets over my head, and soon was roaring and riding in a hook.

Whoa there, my beauties! cried grandpa. His voice sounded very young and loud, and his tongue had powerful hooves, and he made his bedroom into a great meadow. I thought I would see if he was ill, or had set his bedclothes on fire, for my mother had said that he lit his pipe under the blankets, and had warned me to run to his help if I smelt smoke in the night.

I went on tiptoe through the darkness to his bedroom door, brushing against the furniture and upsetting a candlestick with a thump. When I saw there was a light in the room I felt frightened, and as I opened the door I heard grandpa shout, ***Gee-up!*** as loudly as a bull with a megaphone.

He was sitting straight up in bed and rocking from side to side as though the bed were on a rough road; the knotted edges of the counterpane were his reins; his invisible horse stood in a shadow beyond the bedside candle. Over a white flannel nightshirt he was wearing a red waistcoat with walnut-sized brass buttons. The over-filled bowl of his pipe smouldered among his whiskers like a little, burning hayrick on a stick. At the sight of me, his hands dropped from the reins and lay blue and quiet, the bed stopped still on a level road, he muffled his tongue into silence, and the horses drew softly up.

Is there anything the matter, grandpa? I asked, though the clothes were not on fire. His face in the candlelight looked like a ragged quilt pinned upright on the black air and patched all over with goat-beards. He stared at me mildly. Then he blew down his pipe, scattering the sparks and making a high, wet dog-whistle of the stem, and shouted: ***Ask no questions.***

After a pause, he said slyly: ***Do you ever have nightmares, boy?***

I said: ***No.***

Oh, yes, you do! he said.

I said I was woken by a voice that was shouting to horses.

What did I tell you? he said. ***You eat too much. Who ever heard of horses in a bedroom?***

He fumbled under his pillow, brought out a small tinkling bag, and carefully untied its strings. He put a sovereign in my hand, and said: ***Buy a cake.*** I thanked him and wished him good night. As I closed my bedroom door, I heard his voice crying loudly and gaily, ***Gee-up I gee-up!*** and the rocking of the travelling bed. **LX 8 (C @ 65% 15s)**

In the morning I woke from a dream of fiery horses on a plain that was littered with furniture, and of large, cloudy men who rode six horses at a time and whipped them with burning bed-clothes. Grandpa was at breakfast dressed in deep black.

After breakfast he said; ***There was a terrible loud wind in the night.*** and he sat in his armchair by the hearth to make clay balls for the fire.

Later in the morning he took me for a walk, through Johnstown village and into the fields on the Llanstephan road. A man with a whippet said, ***There's a nice morning, Mr Thomas.*** and when he had gone, leanly as his dog, into the short-treed green wood he should not have entered because of the notices, grandpa said: ***There, do you hear what he called you? Mister!***

We passed by small cottages, and all the men who leant on the gates congratulated grandpa on the fine morning. We passed through the wood full of pigeons, and their wings broke the branches as they rushed to the tops of the trees. Among the soft, contented voices and the loud, timid flying, grandpa said, like a man calling across a field: ***If you heard those old birds in the night, you'd wake me up and say there were horses in the trees.***

We walked back slowly, for he was tired, and the lean man stalked out of the forbidden wood with a rabbit held as gently over his arm as a girl's arm in a warm sleeve.

On the last day but one of my visit, I was taken to Llanstephan in a governess cart, pulled by a short, weak pony. Grandpa might have been driving a bison, so tightly he held the reins, so ferociously cracked the long whip, so blasphemously shouted warnings to boys who played in the road, so stoutly

stood with his gaitered legs apart and cursed the demon strength and willfulness of his tottering pony.

Look out, boy! he cried, when we came to each corner, and pulled and tugged and jerked and sweated and waved his whip like a rubber sword. And when the pony had crept miserably round each corner, grandpa turned to me with a sighing smile: **We weathered that one, boy!**

When we came to Llanstephan village at the top of the hill, he left the cart by the Edwinsford Arms and patted the pony's muzzle and gave it sugar, saying: **You're a weak little pony, Jim, to pull big men like us.**

He had strong beer and I had lemonade, and he paid Mrs Edwinsford with a sovereign out of the tinkling bag; she inquired after his health, and he said that Llangadock was better for the tubes.

We went to look at the churchyard and the sea, and sat in the wood called The Sticks, and stood on the concert platform in the middle of the wood where visitors sang on midsummer nights and, year by year, the innocent of the village was elected mayor. Grandpa paused at the churchyard and pointed over the iron gate at the angelic headstones and the poor wooden crosses. **There's no sense in lying there.** he said.

We journeyed back furiously: Jim was a bison again.

I woke late on my last morning, out of dreams where the Llanstephan sea carried bright sailing boats as long as liners; and heavenly choirs in the Sticks, dressed in bards robes and brass-buttoned waistcoats sang in a strange Welsh to the departing sailors. Grandpa was not at breakfast; he rose early.

LX 9 (C to full 15s)

I walked in the fields with a new sling, and shot at the Towy gulls and the rooks in the parsonage trees. A warm wind blew from the summer points of the weather; a morning mist climbed from the ground and floated among the trees and hid the noisy birds; in the mist and the wind my pebbles flew lightly up like hailstones in a world on its head. The morning passed without a bird falling.

I broke my sling and returned for the midday meal through the parsons orchard. Once, grandpa told me, the parson had bought three ducks at Carmarthen Fair and made a pond for them in the centre of the garden, but they waddled to the gutter under the crumbling doorsteps of the house, and swam and quacked there.

When I reached the end of the orchard path, I looked through a hole in the hedge and saw that the parson had made a tunnel through the rockery that was between the gutter and the pond and had set up a notice in plain writing: This way to the pond. The ducks were still swimming under the steps.

Grandpa was not in the cottage. I went into the garden, but grandpa was not staring at the fruit trees. I called across to a man who leant on a spade in the field beyond the garden hedge: ***Have you seen my grandpa this morning?***

He did not stop digging, and answered over his shoulder: ***I seen him in his fancy waistcoat.*** Griff, the barber, lived in the next cottage. I called to him through the open door: ***Mr Griff, have you seen my grandpa?*** The barber came out in his shirtsleeves. I said: ***He's wearing his best waistcoat.*** I did not know if it was important, but grandpa wore his waistcoat only in the night.

Has grandpa been to Llanstephan? asked Mr Griff anxiously. ***He went there yesterday in a little trap.*** I said.

He hurried indoors and I heard him talking in Welsh, and he came out again with his white coat on, and he carried a striped and coloured walking-stick. He strode down the village street and I ran by his side.

When we stopped at the tailors shop, he cried out, ***Dan!*** and Dan tailor stepped from his window where he sat like an Indian priest but wearing a derby hat.

Dai Thomas has got his waistcoat on, said Mr Griff, ***and hes been to Llanstephan.*** As Dan tailor searched for his overcoat, Mr Griff was striding on. ***Will Evans,*** he called outside the carpenters shop, ***Dai Thomas has been to Llanstephan, and he's got his waistcoat on.***

I'll tell Morgan now. said the carpenter's wife out of the hammering, sawing, darkness of the shop. We called at the

butchers shop and Mr Price's house, and Mr Griff repeated his message like a town crier.

We gathered together in Johnstown square. Dan tailor had his bicycle, Mr Price his pony trap. Mr Griff, the butcher, Morgan carpenter, and I climbed into the shaking trap, and we trotted off towards Carmarthen town. The tailor led the way, ringing his bell as though there were a fire or a robbery, and an old woman by the gate of a cottage at the end of the street ran inside like a pelted hen. Another woman waved a bright handkerchief.

Where are we going? I asked. Grandpa's neighbours were as solemn as old men with black hats and jackets on the outskirts of a fair. Mr Griff shook his head and mourned:

I didn't expect this again from Dai Thomas.

Not after the last time. said Mr Price sadly.

We trotted on, we crept up Constitution Hill, we rattled down into Lammas Street, and the tailor still rang his bell and a dog ran, squealing, in front of his wheels. As we clip-clopped over the cobbles that led down to the Towy bridge, I remembered grandpa's nightly noisy journeys that rocked the bed and shook the walls, and I saw his gay waistcoat in a vision and his patchwork head tufted and smiling in the candlelight. The tailor before us turned round on his saddle, his bicycle wobbled and skidded. ***I see Dai Thomas!*** he cried.

The trap rattled on to the bridge, and I saw grandpa there: the buttons of his waistcoat shone in the sun, he wore his tight, black Sunday trousers and a tall, dusty hat I had seen in a cupboard in the attic, and he carried an ancient bag. He bowed to us. ***Good morning, Mr Price,*** he said, ***and Mr Griff and Mr Morgan and Mr Evans.*** To me he said: ***Mornin, boy.***

Mr Griff pointed his coloured stick at him. ***And what do you think you are doing on Carmarthen bridge in the middle of the afternoon*** - he said sternly - ***with your best waistcoat and your old hat?***

Grandpa did not answer, but inclined his face to the river wind, so that his beard was set dancing and wagging as though he talked, and watched the coracle men move, like turtles, on the shore.

Mr Griff raised his stunted barbers pole. ***And where do you think you are going*** - he said -***with your old black bag?***

Grandpa said: ***I am going to Llangadock to be buried.***

And he watched the coracle shells slip into the water lightly, and the gulls complain over the fish-filled water as bitterly as Mr Price complained:

But you aren't dead yet, Dai Thomas.

For a moment grandpa reflected, then:

There's no sense in lying dead in Llanstephan. he said.
The ground is comfy in Llangadock; you can twitch your legs there without putting 'em in the sea.

His neighbours moved close to him.

But, you aren't dead, Mr Thomas.

How can you be buried, then?

Nobody's going to bury you in Llanstephan.

Come on home, Mr Thomas.

There's strong beer for tea.

And cake.

But grandpa stood firmly on the bridge, and clutched his bag to his side, and stared at the flowing river and the sky, like a prophet **LX 10 (B/O 7s)** who has no doubt.

Count 3 in Black then **LX 11 (C 7s)**

Actor bows, takes drink then comes forward to give an explanation of WHY Dylan wrote – and follows with:

IN MY CRAFT OR SULLEN ART

In my craft or sullen art
Exercised in the still night
when only the moon rages
And the lovers lie abed
with all their griefs in their arms
I labour by singing light

Not for ambition or bread
Or the strut and trade of charms on the ivory stages
But for the common wages of their most secret heart.

Not for the proud man apart from the raging Moon
I write on these spindrift pages.
Nor for the towering dead, with their nightingales and psalms.
But for the lovers, their arms round the griefs of the ages
Who pay no praise or wages Nor heed my craft or art.

*Actor bows, takes water. Then improvises again,
impersonating the famous names that have been associated
with the works of Dylan Thomas – Thomas himself, Richard
Burton, Anthony Hopkins...*

He then signals **LX 12 (B 7s)**

A CHRISTMAS STORY (or A CHILD'S CHRISTMAS IN WALES)

One Christmas was so much like another, in those years,
around the sea town corner now, out of all sound except the
distant speaking of the voices I sometimes hear a moment
before sleep, that I can never remember whether it snowed for
six days and six nights when I was twelve, or whether it
snowed for twelve days and twelve nights when I was six.

Or whether the ice broke and the skating grocer vanished like
a snowman through a white trap-door on that same Christmas
Day that the mince-pies finished Uncle Arnold and we
tobogganed down the seaward hill, and all the afternoon, on
the best tea-tray, and Mrs Griffiths complained, and we threw
a snowball at her niece, and my hands burned so, with the
heat and the cold, when I held them in front of the fire, that I
cried for twenty minutes and then had some jelly.

All the Christmases roll down the hill towards the Welsh-
speaking sea, like a snowball growing whiter and bigger and
rounder, like a cold and headlong moon bundling down the sky
that was our street, and they stop at the rim of the ice-edged,
fish-freezing waves, and I plunge my hands in the snow and
bring out whatever I can find.

Holly or Robins or pudding, squabbles and carols and oranges
and tin whistles, and the fire in the front room and bang go the
crackers, and holy, holy, holy, ring the bells, and the glass

bells shaking on the tree, and Mother Goose and Struwwelpeter - oh! The baby-burning flames and the clacking scissorman! Billy Bunter and Black Beauty, Little Women and boys who have three helpings, Alice and Mrs Potter's badgers, penknives, teddy bears, or Father - who died recently in the United States - Christmas, mouth-organs, tin-soldiers, and blancmange, and Auntie Bessie playing *Pop Goes The Weasel* and *Nuts In May* and *Oranges And Lemons* on the untuned piano in the parlour all through the thimble-hiding musical-chairing, blind-man's-buffing party at the end of the never-to-be-forgotten day at the end of the unremembered year.

In goes my hand into that wool-white, bell-tongued ball of holidays resting at the margin of the carol-singing sea, and out comes Mrs Prothero and the firemen. **LX 13 (E 7 secs)**

It was on the afternoon of the day of Christmas Eve, and I was in Mrs Prothero's garden, waiting for cats, with her son Jim.

It was snowing. It was always snowing at Christmas; December, in my memory, is white as Lapland; though there were no reindeers. But there were cats. Patient, cold, and callous, our hands wrapped in socks, we waited to snowball the cats. Sleek and long as jaguars and terrible whiskered, spitting and snarling they would slink and sidle over the white back-garden walls, and the lynx-eyed hunters, Jim and I, fur-capped and moccasined trappers from Hudson's Bay - off Mumbles Road - would hurl our deadly snowballs at the green of their eyes. The wise cats never appeared.

We were so still, Eskimo-footed arctic marksmen in the muffling silence of the eternal snows - eternal, ever since Wednesday, that we never heard Mrs Prothero's first cry from her igloo at the bottom of the garden. Or if we heard it at all, it was, to us, like the far off challenge of our enemy and prey, the neighbour's polar cat. But soon the voice grew louder...

Fire! - cried Mrs Prothero, and she beat the dinner gong.

And we ran down the garden, with the snowballs in our arms, towards the house, and smoke, indeed, was pouring out of the dining room, and the gong was bombilating, and Mrs Prothero was announcing **RUIN!** like a town crier in Pompeii... This was better than all the cats in Wales standing on the wall in a row.

And we bounded into the house, laden with snowballs, and stopped at the open door of the smoke-filled room... Something was burning all right; perhaps it was Mr Prothero, who always slept there after mid-day dinner, with a newspaper over his face; but he was standing in the middle of the room saying, **A fine Christmas!** and smacking at the smoke with his slipper....

Call the fire brigade! cried Mrs Prothero, as she beat the gong. **They won't be there!** said Mr Prothero, **It's Christmas!**

Well, there was no fire to be seen, only clouds of smoke, and Mr Prothero standing in the middle of them, waving his slipper as though he were conducting. **Do something!** he said... So we threw all our snowballs into the smoke - I think we missed Mr Prothero - and ran out of the house to the telephone box.

Let's call the police as well. Jim said **And the ambulance!** **And Ernie Jenkins, he likes fires!**

But we only called the fire brigade, and soon the fire engine came and three tall men in helmets brought a hose into the **LX 14 (C 5s)** house and Mr Prothero got out just in time before they turned it on... Nobody could have had a noisier Christmas Eve. And when the firemen turned off the hose and were standing in the wet and smoky room, Jim's aunt, Miss Prothero, came downstairs and peered in at them. Jim and I waited, very quietly, to hear what she would say to them. She said the right thing, always. She looked at the three tall firemen in their shining helmets, standing among the smoke and cinders and dissolving snowballs and she said: **Would you like something to read?** **LX 15 (C 5s)**

Years and years and years ago, when I was a boy, when there were wolves in Wales, and birds the colour of red- flannel petticoats whisked the harp-shaped hills, when we sang and wallowed all night and day in caves that smelt like Sunday afternoons in damp front farmhouse parlours, and chased, with the jawbones of Deacons, the English and the bears, before the motor-car, before the wheel, before the duchess-faced horse, when we rode the daft and happy hills bareback, it snowed and it snowed... **LX 16 (E 7s)**

But here a small boy says: ***It snowed last year too. I made a snowman and my brother knocked it down, and I knocked my brother down and then we had tea.***

But that was not the same snow. - I say - Our snow was not only shaken in whitewash buckets down the sky, it came shoaling out of the ground and swam and drifted out the arms and hands and bodies of the trees.

Our snow grew overnight on the roofs of the houses like a pure and grandfather moss, minutely ivied the walls, and settled on the postman, opening the gates, like a dumb, numb thunderstorm of white, torn Christmas cards.

Were there postmen then too?

With sprinkling eyes and wind-cherried noses, on spread frozen feet, they'd crunch up to the doors and mitten on them manfully. But all that the children could hear was a ringing of bells.

You mean that the postmen went rat-a-tat-tat and the doors rang?

The bells that the children could hear were inside them. I only hear thunder sometimes, never bells.

There were church bells too.

Inside them?

No, no, no. In the bat-black, snow-white belfries, tugged by bishops and storks. And they rang their tidings over the bandaged town, over the frozen foam of the powder and ice cream hills, over the crackling sea. It seems that all the churches boomed for joy under my window and the weather cocks crew for Christmas on our fence.

Get back to the postmen.

They were just ordinary postmen, fond of walking, and dogs, and Christmas, and the snow. They would knock on the doors with blue knuckles.

Ours has got a black knocker.

... and then they stood on the white welcome mat in the little, drifted porches and clapped their hands together and huffed and puffed making ghosts with their breath and jogged from foot to foot like small boys wanting to go out...

And then the presents?

And then the presents - after the Christmas box... And the cold postman, with a rose on his button nose, would tingle down the tea-tray slithered run of the chilly glinting hill. He went in his ice-bound boots, like a man on fishmonger's slabs, he wagged his bag like a frozen camel's hump, dizzily turned the corner on one foot, and by God he'd be gone.

Get on to the presents! **LX 17 (B 7s)**

Now out of the bright white snowball of Christmas gone comes the stocking, the stocking of stockings, that hung at the foot of the bed with the arm of the golliwog dangling over the top and small bells ringing in the toes.

There was a company, gallant and scarlet, but never nice to taste though I always tried when very young, of belted and busbied and musketed lead soldiers so soon to lose their heads and legs in the wars on the kitchen table after the tea-things and mince pies, and the cakes that I helped to make by stoning the raisins and eating them, had been cleared away.

And then the useless presents...

Bags of moist and many coloured jelly babies, and a folded flag and a false nose, and a tram-conductors cap and a machine that punched tickets and rang a bell; never a catapult; once, by a mistake that no-one could explain, a little hatchet; and a rubber buffalo, or it may have been a horse, with a yellow head and haphazard legs;

And a celluloid duck that made when you pressed it a most un-ducklike noise - a mewling moo that an ambitious cat might make who wishes to be a cow; and a painting book in which I could make the grass, the trees, the sea and the animals any colour I pleased; and still the dazzling sky-blue sheep are grazing in the red field under a flight of rainbow- beaked and pea-green birds.

Hardboileds, toffee, fudge and allsorts, crunches, cracknels, humbugs, glaciers and marzipan and butterwelsh for the Welsh. And troops of bright tin soldiers who, if they would not fight, could always run. and Snakes-and-Families and Happy Ladders. And Easy Hobbi-Games for Little Engineers, complete with instructions... Oh, easy for Leonardo! And a whistle to make the dogs bark to wake up the old man next door to make him beat on our wall with his stick to shake our picture off the wall. And a packet of cigarettes; you put one in your mouth and you stood at the corner of the street and you waited for hours, in vain, for an old lady to scold you for smoking a cigarette and then, with a smirk, you ate it... And then, last of all, in the toe of the stocking, a sixpence like a silver corn.

And there were the useful presents; engulfing mufflers of the old coach days, and mittens made for giant sloths; zebra scarves of a substance like silky gum that could be tug-o-warred down to the galoshes; Blinding tam-o-shanters like patchwork tea-cosies, and bunnyscutted busbies and balaclavas for victims of head-shrinking tribes; from aunties who always wore wool-next-to-the-skin, there were moustached and rasping vests that made you wonder why the aunties had any skin left at all; And once I had a little crocheted nose-bag from an auntie, now, alas, no longer whinnying with us. And pictureless books in which small boys, though warned with quotations not to, would skate on Farmer Giles pond, and did, and drowned; and books that told me everything about the wasp except why. And then downstairs for breakfast under the balloons...

Were there uncles then too?

There are always uncles at Christmas.

The same uncles. **LX 18 (E 7s)**

And on Christmas mornings, with dog-disturbing whistle and sugar-fags, I would scour the swathed town for news of the little world, and find always a dead bird by the post office or the white, deserted swings; perhaps a Robin, all but one of his fires out.

Men and women, wading and scooping back from church or chapel, with taproom noses and wind-smacked cheeks, all

albinos, huddled their stiff black jarring feathers against the irreligious snow. Mistletoe hung from the gas in all the front parlours; there was sherry and walnuts and bottled beer and crackers by the desert-spoons; and cats in their fur-about watched the fires; and the high-heaped fires crackled and spat, all ready for the chestnuts and the mulling pokers.

Some few large men sat in the front parlours without their collars, uncles almost certainly, trying out their new cigars, holding them out judiciously at arms-length, returning them to their mouths, coughing, then holding them out again as though waiting for the explosion; and some few small Aunts, not wanted in the kitchen, nor anywhere else for that matter, sat on the very edges of their chairs, poised and brittle, afraid to break, like faded cups and saucers.

Not many, those mornings, trod the piling streets; an old man always, fawn-bowlered, yellow-gloved and, at this time of year, with spats of snow, would take his constitutional to the white bowling green, and back, as he would take it wet or fine on Christmas Day or Doomsday; sometimes two hale young men, with big pipes blazing, no overcoats, and windblown scarves, would trudge, unspeaking, down to the forlorn sea, to work up an appetite, to blow away the fumes, who knows, to walk into the waves until nothing of them was left but the two curling smoke-clouds of their inextinguishable briars.

But Christmas morning was always over before you could say Jack Frost.

But why didn't you go home for Christmas dinner?

Oh but I did, I always did!

I'd be slap dashing home, the gravy smell of the dinners of others, the bird smell, the brandy, the pudding and the mince, weaving up my nostrils, when out of a snow-clogged side-lane would come a boy the spit of myself, with a pink-tipped cigarette and the violet past of a black eye, cocky as a bullfinch, leering all to himself.

Well, I hated him on sight and sound, and would be about to put my dog-whistle to my lips and blow him off the face of Christmas, when suddenly he, with a violet wink, put his whistle to his lips and blew so stridently, so high, so exquisitely

loud, that gobbling faces, their cheeks bulged with goose, would press against their tinselled windows, the whole length of the white echoing street.

What d'you have for dinner? LX 19 (B 7s)

Turkey and a trillion veg.

Was it nice?

It was not made on Earth.

And look! Suddenly the pudding was blazing! Bang goes the gong and, ***Call the fire-brigade and the book-loving firemen!***

Someone found the three-penny bit with a currant on it; and that someone was always uncle Arnold.

And the motto in my cracker read; ***Let's all have fun the Christmas day, Let's play and sing and shout hooray!*** and the grown ups turned their eyes towards the ceiling.

And someone put a glass bowl full of nuts on the littered table and one uncle said, as he said once every year; ***I've got a shoe-nut here. Fetch me a shoe-horn to open it boy!***

And after dinner the uncles sat in front of the fire, took off their collars, loosened all buttons, put their large moist hands over their watch chains, groaned a little, and slept. Mothers, Aunts and sisters scuttled to and fro, bearing tureens. Auntie Bessie, who had already been frightened, twice, by a clockwork mouse, whimpered at the side-board and had some elderberry wine.

The dog was sick. Auntie Bessie had to have three aspirins, but Auntie Hannah, who liked Port, stood in the middle of the snowbound back-yard, singing like a big-bosomed thrush. I would blow up balloons to see how big they would blow up to, and when they burst, which they all did, the uncles jumped and rumbled.

In the rich and heavy afternoon, the uncles breathing like Dolphins and the snow descending, I would sit in the front room, among festoons and Chinese lanterns, and nibble at dates, and try to make a model man-o-war, following the

Instructions for Little Engineers, and produce what might be mistaken for a sea-going tram. **LX 20 (E 7s)**

Or I would go out, gloved and muffled, my bright new boots squeaking, into the white world, on the seaward hill, to call on Jim and Dan and Jack and to pad through the still streets, leaving huge footprints in the snow on the hidden pavements.

I'll bet people'll think there's been hippos.

What would you do if you saw a hippo coming down our road?

I'd go like this, bang! I'd throw him over the railings and roll him down the hill, and then I'd tickle him under the ear and he'd wag his tail...

What would you do if you saw two hippos?

Iron flanked and bellowing he-hippos clanked and battered through the scudding snow towards us as we passed by Mr Daniel's house.

Let's post Mr Daniel a snowball through his letterbox.

Let's write things in the snow.

Let's write, "Mr Daniel looks like a Spaniel" all over his lawn.

Look! Jack said, ***I'm eating snow-pie!***

What's it taste like?

Like snow-pie. Jack said.

Or we'd walk on the white shore...

Can the fishes see it's snowing?

They'll think it's the sky falling down.

The silent one-clouded heavens drifted on to the sea...

I'll bet St Bernards would like it now.

Now we were snow-blind travellers lost on the north hills, and vast dewlapped dogs, with flasks around their necks, ambled and shambled up to us, baying “Courvoisier”.

We returned home through the desolate poor sea-facing streets, where only a few children fumbled with bare red fingers in the thick wheel-rutted snow and cat-called after us, their voices fading away, as we trudged uphill, into the cries of the dock-birds and hooters of ships out in the white and whirling bay. **LX 21 (B 10s)**

And then, at tea, the recovered uncles would be jolly, and the great iced cake loomed in the centre of the table like a marble grave. Auntie Hannah laced her tea with rum, because it was only once a year...

Bring out the tall tales now that we told by the fire as we roasted chestnuts and the gaslight bubbled low. Where ghosts whooooooed like owls in the long night when I dared not look over my shoulder and wild beasts lurked in the cubby-hole under the stairs where the gas-meter ticked. And others sat around the fire and told each other that this was nothing, no, nothing, to the great snow-bound and turkey-proud yule-log cracking holly-berry-bedizined and kissing-under-the-mistletoe Christmas when they were children...

Once upon a time... - Jim said - there were three boys, just like us, who got lost in the dark in the snow, near Bethesda Chapel, and this is what happened to them....
And it was the most dreadful happening I had ever heard...

LX 22 (E to 50% 10s)

And I remember that we went singing carols once when there wasn't the shaving of the moon to light the secret, white- flying streets... At the end of a long road was a drive that led to a large house, and we stumbled up the darkness of the drive that night, each one of us afraid, each one holding a stone in his hand in case, and all of us too brave to say a word. The wind through the trees made noises as of old and unpleasant and maybe web-footed men wheezing in caves as we reached the black bulk of the house.

What shall we give 'em? “Hark the Herald”?

No, Jack said; “Good King Wenceslas” I'll count three...

One, two, three, and we began to sing, our voices high and seemingly distant in the snow-felted darkness round the house that was occupied by nobody we knew. We stood close together, near the dark door.

***Good King Wenceslas looked out
On the Feast of Stephen.***

And then a small, dry voice, like the voice of someone who has not spoken for a long time, suddenly joined our singing; a small dry voice from the other side of the door; a small dry voice through the keeeeyyy-hhhhhoole! **LX 23 (B 15s)**

And when we stopped running we were outside our house; the front room was lovely and bright, the gramophone was playing, the red and white balloons floated under the hot- water-bottle gulping gas, I could smell our supper being fried in the kitchen, everything was good again, and Christmas shone through all the familiar town.

Perhaps it was a ghost. Jim Said.

Perhaps it was trolls. Dan said - who was always reading.

Let's go in and see if there's any jelly left. Jack said.... and we did that.

And always on Christmas night there was music. An Uncle played the fiddle, a cousin sang "Cherry Ripe", and another Uncle sang "Drake's Drum." It was very warm in the little house. Auntie Hannah, who had got onto the parsnip wine, sang a song about Bleeding Hearts, and Death, and then another in which she said that her Heart was like a Birds Nest; and then everybody laughed again, and then I went to bed...

LX 24 (B to 35% & A @ 20% 7s)

Looking through my bedroom window, out into the moonlight and the flying, unending, smoke-coloured snow, I could see the lights in the windows of all the other houses on our hill, and hear the music rising from them, up the long, steadily falling night. I turned the gas down...

LX 25 (A @ 15% 3s)

I got into bed... I said some words to the close and holy darkness, and then ... **LX 26 (B/O 10s)** I slept.

Count 3 in Black & out **LX 27 (C 5s)** ***Curtain Call***

LX 28 (D + H/L 7s) & **SFX 5 (Exit music)**