

From Memories of Christmas

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Written as one of a series of autobiographical talks, published under the title *Quite Early One Morning*, which he read for BBC radio in the late thirties and during the war.

It was always snowing at Christmas; December, in my memory is white as Lapland, though there were no reindeers. And I remember that on the afternoon of Christmas Day, I would go out, school-capped and gloved and muffled, with my bright new boots squeaking, into the white world on the seaward hill, to call on Jim and Dan and Jack and to walk with them through the silent snowscape of our town.

We went paddling through the streets, leaving huge deep footprints in the snow, on the hidden pavements.

'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.....' It was the most dreadful happening I had ever heard.

And I remember that we went singing carols once, a night or two before Christmas Eve, when there wasn't the shaving of a 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 made through the drive-trees noises as of old and unpleasant and maybe web-footed men wheezing in caves. We reached the black bulk of the house.

'What shall we give them?' Dan whispered.

'Hark the Herald? Christmas comes but Once a Year?'

'No,' Jack said: 'We'll sing "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 keyhole. And when we stopped running we were outside *our* house; the front room was lovely and bright; the gramophone was playing; we saw the red and white balloons hanging from the gas-bracket; uncles and aunts sat by the fire; I thought I smelt 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.