

C is for Christmas

It's nearly Christmas. The school Christmas party starts off the fun. We make party hats out of red and green crepe paper or cardboard in our crafts lesson. Mine's a golden crown studded with jewels (Rowntree's Fruit Gums). We cut shapes out of folded paper to make doilies and make ourselves feel sick, licking the glue on the ends of the paper strips, to make long chains to festoon the classroom.

I carry a red jelly dotted with pineapple chunks in a glass dish on which my mum had stuck a label showing my name.

"Mind you bring back that dish, our Margaret, or there'll be trouble."

We play "*Musical Chairs*", "*Statues*" and "*In and Out the Bluebell Windows*" in the school hall. I hate being chosen for the dog in '*The Farmer wants a wife*'. Some people are a bit over-enthusiastic when it comes to "*we all pat the dog*".

The Infant class are performing a Nativity Play. My little sister is a cockerel who lives in the barn where baby Jesus is born. She wears a brown jumper, brown tights and has a feather duster stuck to her bottom. A bright red cardboard comb sticks up on top of her head. Mary Simpson's dolly is baby Jesus. She holds the baby so tightly that he's squashed. When she lays him in the manger he is upside down.

My cousin Barbara works at the Rock Mill on Wilshaw Lane. Just before Christmas they hold a children's party. Barbara hasn't got any children yet so she invites me. I'm not sure I want to go. I won't know anybody and I'm only seven.

"You'll enjoy it. And I bet they have jelly and ice-cream"

They do have jelly and pink and white ice-cream. Father Christmas comes and I have another parcel to take home. We play some games and run around sliding on the slippery floor. I am knocked out quickly in '*Musical Chairs*'. A big boy sent me flying and I want to cry.

"Love and marriage, love and marriage, go together like a horse and carriage..."

The grown-ups are singing along. I run to collect my yellow balloon and piece of cake. My Dad is waiting for me. I'd almost forgotten that we're going home to a different house. We flitted last week to a new place with three bedrooms AND an inside toilet and bathroom. There's even a garden with an old lilac tree. There are no carpets on the floors yet and the curtains don't meet in the middle but my Mum says we'll be sorted by Christmas.

The Saturday before Christmas is the Sunday school Christmas party. The big room has been decorated with paper chains and Chinese lanterns and a big net full of balloons hangs from the ceiling. The Christmas tree on the stage is covered with coloured lights. On the afternoon before the party starts I go to Sunday School with my mum to help the ladies get the tea ready. The kitchen is crowded and steamy. The big brown teapots are lined up on the table and the dull steel boiler is wheezing into life. Someone is filling sparkly glass bowls with sugar. A long wooden trestle table has been set up by the fire and it's piled high with sliced bunnies which all need buttering. The butter is so hard that it won't spread properly. My mum sits me on a little stool by the fire, holding the butter dish to the flames until it softens. Why are thin bread rolls called 'Bunnies', I wonder? They don't have long ears or a fluffy tail.

One of the ladies is slicing a juicy pink ham and there's bowls of crispy green lettuce, pale green circles of cucumber, sliced tomatoes and deep red beetroot. Everyone is chattering away as they work to make sandwiches. Aunt Mary passes me, with her home-made piccalilli jars in her arms.

"That's a nice kilt, Margaret. Is it new?"

I'm proud of my pleated kilt. It's Black Watch tartan and has a big pin that holds the hem together. I have a red knitted jumper with white reindeer galloping around my middle.

In the 'Big' Room the Dads are putting up more trestle tables, covering the rough wooden tops with smooth white paper. The plates are laid out at even intervals. They have blue and gold rims with writing spelling out "Wesleyan Methodist". Knives, forks and spoons next, with the bowls of sugar arranged down the middle of the table and the yellow-green piccalilli in dishes in between.

By 5 o'clock everyone has arrived and they are taking their places at the tables. The Minister raps sharply on the table with his spoon, holds up his hand for silence and says "Grace" - *"For what we are about to receive, may the Lord make us truly thankful"*. A hundred chairs scrape across the wooden floor and the knives and forks clash and jingle as everyone starts to eat. Plates of bread and butter are passed backwards and forwards. I am waiting for the pudding. It's red jelly and custard, one of my favourites. Thick white cups of strong brown tea appear along with plates piled high with slices of dark brown fruit cake, glistening with red cherries.

All the children go into the back room after tea to watch a film show. The projector starts to whirl and some of the bigger boys make shadow pictures on the screen by moving their hands into different shapes. The film begins and large numbers going backwards appear on the screen. We all shout "5...4...3...2....1"

Laurel and Hardy are falling about. Mr Hardy is fat and bossy and is always shouting at Mr Laurel who looks as though he's just woken up and doesn't know what's happening. When that film ends there's lots of whistling and shouting until the next film starts. It's *'Mr Pastry'*, one of my favourites. Our film show ends with Mr Hennings' cine-film of the Whit Walks. We can spot ourselves holding on to a banner string or carrying the corner of a float that reads *"Suffer the little children"* or *"Jesus wants me for a sunbeam"*. I see myself in my new blue organdie dress with a sticky-out skirt and puffed sleeves. I have already grown out of that dress. I still wear the white pop-stud necklace that came from Woolworth. The big girls who walk with the banner are wearing shirt-waister dresses and carrying bouquets of flowers.

The lights come on suddenly, we all blink in the brightness, then dash through to the Big Room which has been magically transformed. All the tables have been packed away and the older people are sitting along the wooden benches lining each side of the room. They are all chattering and watching us as we slide across the floor on the chalky stuff that's been sprinkled on the boards for dancing later.

"Come and sit down now, children"

Our Sunday school teacher, Miss Brown, is calling us. We sit on pink and blue painted wooden chairs that are gathered in a circle. The lights are dimmed; just the Christmas Tree lights glowing red and green. We hear the sound of heavy boots approaching. A delicious shiver of anticipation run down my back. There's a loud knocking on the outside door and Mr Hurst calls *"Who's there?"* and then opens the door.

Father Christmas stamps into the room, pulling a stout wooden sledge full of gaily wrapped parcels. He waves a greeting to the grown-ups and then the piano starts to play. Miss Brown coughs to attract our attention and we begin to sing:

“Away in a Manger, no crib for a bed”....

Father Christmas looks pleased with our singing. We line up as he begins to give out his parcels. I rip off the crinkly crepe paper. It’s a magic colouring book where you just use a paintbrush dipped in water to bring out the colours. You have to be careful not to get your brush too wet though or all the colours run and you end up with a muddy brown mess. Father Christmas is leaving now. He must be very busy with so many children to visit.

The lights go on again and the games begin. There are racing games, guessing games and team games. We make hats out of newspaper and the best one wins a handful of sweets. In one game the grown-ups have to pass an orange down the line but they are not allowed to use their hands or feet. They hold the orange under the chin and then put their necks very close together. There’s a lot of giggling and some red faces. I am waiting for the Fancy Dress Parade. I am the Queen of Hearts in a red velvet cloak, a white satin dress covered with red hearts and a golden crown. My Nanny has baked a dozen jam tarts that I carry on a wooden tray. I hope I don’t drop them. Two of my cousins are dressed as the Bisto Kids, like the ones in the advert. They win First Prize.

It’s time for the grown-ups’ dancing. More of the white chalky stuff is scattered on the floor. Uncle John is first on the floor, wearing his shiny black dancing slippers. He kicks up his heels at each turn of the Quick Step. The ladies move along during the Progressive Barn Dance so they have a new partner each time. The Military Two Step is very energetic and the ladies rush to sit down at the end. When I go into the toilets, the big girls are crowded round the tiny mirror, trying on each other’s lipstick.

I’m getting tired now. I sit next to my Grandad and lean on his arm. He’s waiting to hear who has won the Whist Drive. I don’t know what whist is because the grown-ups disappear into another room to play. I want grandad to win the Booby Prize as everyone cheers when the winner of that prize is announced.

But I don’t want to miss the moment all the children have been waiting for. The net holding all the balloons is released and there’s a mad scramble to grab a balloon. I mustn’t let John Wrigley pop mine; I want to take it home to remind me of a lovely Christmas Party.

Next morning the ‘Big Room’ is different again. The wooden benches are arranged in rows facing the stage. There’s a big table on the platform piled high with books. Every Sunday we have our star cards marked to show we have attended Sunday school. The Sunday School Secretary has a little office where he stamps all the cards with a little purple star. I have a first prize because I haven’t missed a single Sunday. I love choosing a book from a shiny catalogue or sometimes by visiting Burgess and Dyson’s book shop in the Market Avenue. When my name is called I have to walk to the front and climb the steps, shake the hand of the person presenting the prizes and then get back to my seat quickly before having a sneaky look at my new book. I can’t wait to start reading but I know I’ll finish it too quickly.
