

# CHRISTMAS DAY

BY L. DU GARDE PEACH

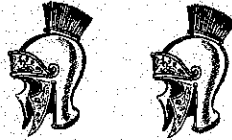
ILLUSTRATIONS  
BY J.R. TEBBUTT



*This Christmas ghost story by L. du Garde Peach first appeared in the former ramblers' magazine "Out of Doors" in its winter, 1947 edition. It is reprinted here with permission of the editor, Tom Stephenson. Laurence du Garde Peach was a well-known local author and dramatist, still remembered for the performances he staged in The Barn Theatre, Great Hucklow, with the Hucklow Players.*

The singing seemed to be coming from under the ground. Or was it? Mark Bagshawe stopped and listened. Everything was still; the intense stillness of the snow-covered Derbyshire countryside under a full moon. It was late, too—nearly midnight. Was it singing? Or only those sounds which are not sounds, but the components of silence? For a full minute Mark stood and listened. On his right a little stream ran noiselessly, its margin crusted with ice, and its high bank in shadow; beyond it rose the mound of the old Roman fort which Mark had known since boyhood. Or longer? Sometimes, as he crossed the path which cut off the corner by the Travellers Rest, he felt—well, he couldn't describe it; *queer*, if you know what I mean. As though if he crossed the little stream and climbed the bank he would find a familiar stone-pillared gateway, and men—a sentry in bronze armour—. Daft, of course, and yet—Was it singing or wasn't it? His ear seemed to catch a sort of soundless echo. Of what? Nothing, probably. He turned and continued along the path to the bridge, where the ford used to be—still was, for that matter. And the old mill which is in Domesday Book, and had been there hundreds of years before that. And his cottage in Brough, just over the bridge—1539 was the date over the door. Middlin' old, both on 'em. "Aye," he said, "there's things goes back a tidy way 'i these parts."

His feet crunched the frozen snow, Win Hill and Mam Tor white against the moon-lit sky behind him. Rare weather for Christmas eve.



The singing was coming from under the ground. Definitely. Marcus stopped and listened. The moon was high, and the countryside lay still under its covering of snow. Snow—how Marcus hated it. But it was natural, in this dismal island of Britain, on—what was the date? Tomorrow would be the twenty-fifth day of the December month. Of course. Hence the singing. It was the celebration of the birth of the Persian God Mithras. This was the third celebration which Marcus had kept in Britain of a date universally observed throughout the whole Roman Army. Nearly three years in this cold wet foggy island! And not even in ANDERIDA or DUBRIS or VECTIS where there was some sunshine, or up on the Wall, where there was fun to be had. But here, amongst the midland hills, at the wayside fort of NAVIO, where there was nothing. Just nothing. Except Idrá. Marcus glanced at the high shadowed bank of the little stream which ran noiselessly on his right, its margin crusted with ice. He thought of Idrá. It was here that he had first met her. Strange, how things happened. Beyond the bank was all the busy life of the fort of NAVIO, the familiar gateway, the sentry in bronze and red leather. He knew it all so well. Three years of it! He first came here in—when was it? His mind began to play with figures. The year 293, if one reckoned by the Julian calendar—1001 by the old method, which started from the foundation of Rome. Anyway, it was three

years—and that was three years too long. Except, of course, for Idrá. His mind went back to her. Queer, how different some of these British girls were. Quite unlike the majority of their countrywomen. Cold as their own snowdrifts, most of them. But not Idrá. Decidedly not Idrá. "Marcus you are rich," she had said. "You don't need to be a soldier. Why shouldn't you leave the army, and build a villa, and settle down in Britain?" Fantastic. And yet, when Idrá said it in that husky British voice of hers, it sounded—not *reasonable*, of course, but as though there might be something in it. Was it her voice, or the warmth of her body as she nestled against his shoulder? That probably had something to do with it, Marcus decided, with the worldly cynicism of his twenty-three years. The singing was clearer now, and familiar. Those particular chants which one only heard on the twenty-fifth day of the December month. He would never again, as long as he lived, hear them without thinking of snow and the wind coming down from Mam Tor like a knife. And Idrá. His thoughts turned again to that first meeting, here by the stream. It had been in spring, when even the foul climate of this miserable island sometimes produced a fine day. A magic evening in the Junius month. Early summer, really. He smiled as he looked back from his apex of experience, at the eager young Roman officer who had waded the stream, his armour reflecting all the colours of the sunset, to speak to the shy-eyed girl on the further bank. He must have looked like a young god to her—Apollo himself probably. Of course her experience was limited. Then. It had become more extensive since. He thought of other evenings, on the slopes of Win Hill, with the purple heather all about them, and perhaps a sparrow hawk hanging motionless in the air above. It was on such an evening that she had told him she

belonged to the new religion which was already gaining some hold in Rome. Christianity—after its founder, a Jew from somewhere in the Trans-Jordan Province. A queer, disturbing sort of religion. How had it come to Britain, he wondered? No sort of religion for an Officer of a Roman Legion. Love your enemy! That sort of thing wouldn't get you very far with the tribes across the Rhine who were always making trouble. Huns and Vandals and Goths and people like that. Not much love your enemy about them!

Wait. The twenty-fifth day of the December month. Wasn't that the day these Christians claimed as the day of the birth of Christ? Of course it was. He smiled as he remembered how horrified Idra had been when he told her the date was simply taken over from the birth day of Mithras, the Persian god of blood. And not only that. The story, for instance, of the Shepherds, bringing gifts to the Child. He had been familiar with it as part of the Mithras legend long before he ever came to Britain, or met Idra—ever since he was initiated Corax in the mithraic mysteries.

"But Marcus," Idra had said, her eyes big,



protesting. "It was the Shepherds of Bethlehem who followed a star in the East—and they heard Angels, singing and saying, glory to God in the highest, peace on earth and goodwill towards men."

"Peace on earth, eh? Before my time, unfortunately. That sort of world wouldn't be much fun."

"The world isn't meant to be fun," Idra had said seriously.

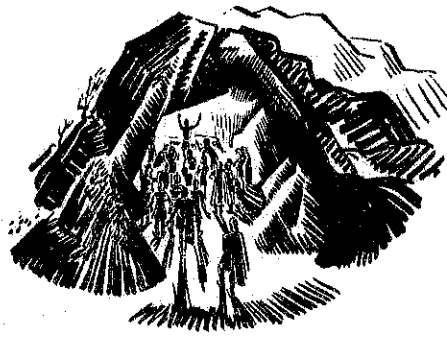
Of course he had soon put a stop to *that* idea. He glanced reminiscently over his shoulder at Win Hill, and shivered as he thought of the snowdrifts, piled now where he and Idra had kissed and argued.

"But Marcus, it was *God* who sent the flood and saved Noah and his family in the ark."

"What thieves you Christians are, Idra," he had laughed. "Can't you invent *any* stories for yourselves? First you steal his birth day from my poor Mithras, and then you take all his best legends. I'd better not listen to you, or Jove knows what he'll do to me the next time I take the bread and wine from the hands of the Pater."

"Oh *no*, Marcus—not that also!" and Idra had been troubled, with no laughter in her, for a whole evening.

Queer, how people upset themselves about religion. Jupiter be thanked it didn't worry



him much. He did what was necessary, of course—a pinch of incense now and again on convenient altars, and so on. And anyhow, how was one to know? There were so many religions, and they all stole from one another. This Christianity now—half of it simply the mithraic mysteries—altered to suit a god of peace. Yet there was something about it. Gentleness—kindliness—a kind of—yes, that was the word—serenity.

Or was it only because he'd heard about it from Idra? Probably. Little witch—she'd make a man believe anything.

Marcus shrugged his shoulders and dismissed Christianity—and even Idra—from his mind as he strode along the side of the stream to the ford by the mill. The crisp snow crunched pleasantly under his feet.

A red glow coloured the trodden snow at the mouth of the cave. Why, Marcus wondered, were mithraic ceremonies always held in caves? The smoke of the sacrificial fire met him as he stooped to enter. Far inside the cave he could see the flames and the silhouetted dark figures moving about the altar. The sacrifice was about to begin. Flavius nodded to him as he took his place. Flavius was his only real friend in this dull hole, he reflected. The friend to whom he told everything—*nearly* everything. They had done their military training together, came to Britain in the same draft. Good old Flavius.

"You're late," Flavius whispered, under cover of the rhythmical rise and fall of the chanting.

Marcus nodded and smiled, and Flavius smiled back understandingly. It was good to have a friend.

The sacrificial bullock was restless, frightened by the fire, but now the long knife plunged into its throat and the blood fell hissing on the altar stone. The familiar smell of the sacrifice mingled with that of the smoke, and the voices rose to a climax. It symbolised the sacrifice of the sacred bull by Mithras at the command of the Sun, sent to him by a raven. Just stories, of course. No enlightened Roman believed them to be actually true, but they were part of the established religion and one accepted them as a social obligation.

The officiating Pater was tearing the entrails from the body of the animal and flinging them into the flames, and some of the initiates were approaching the frenzy which always marked the climax of the ceremony.

Marcus could never feel like that, somehow. He wondered why?

He couldn't even keep his thoughts from wandering. Was Idra really going to have a child? His child! Strange to think that perhaps hundreds of years hence there might be Britons living here in the valley with his blood in their sluggish veins—the dancing blood of sun-drenched Italia. And they would never know. Or would they? They might. They would be different anyway. He wondered whether they would be Christians, like Idra. The picture of her wide grey eyes—serene, that was the word—came before him. Christ, the God of peace—friendliness—neighbourliness. Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. How different from the blood and fire and sacrifice of—

Suddenly something happened to Marcus. He looked at the reeking altar, and the blood-stained arms and hands of the officiating Pater. The smell of the sacrifice was in his throat. The smoke was choking him, and the roof of the cave seemed to be pressing upon his very spirit. The whole thing suddenly seemed unclean—obscene.

And through it he seemed to see the serene face of Idra's Christ—the God of love, of peace, of kindness. This day—the twenty-fifth day of the December month—was his birthday also. How were his followers celebrating it? Not with fire and blood and the entrails of beasts—

His soul sickened. He yearned for clean air and the bite of the frozen wind. Rising from his place he stumbled through the smoke to the entrance.

"Where are you going?"

It was Flavius. But Marcus took no notice. He must get out—out of this hideous cave, away from the smell of burning flesh.

He drew the frosty air into his lungs as he splashed blindly through the stream. He could hear the singing behind him, but he took no heed of it.

Until suddenly it stopped.

Marcus paused, his head lifted, listening.

He realised that he had been conscious of a low rumbling sound. He turned and looked. Where the red glow of the cave mouth had been, was now nothing but a heap of fallen limestone boulders.



Mark Bagshawe paused as he crossed the bridge. He could no longer hear the singing that had seemed to come out of the ground. Suddenly, the bells of Bradwell Church rang out on the frosty air, and as though released by their magic, there came the voices of carollers through the night. Christians awake, salute this happy morn, they were singing. By gum! Christians awake—and he hadn't been to bed yet!

He glanced round again at the old mill and the ford and the rising ground where the Roman fort had been.

"Aye," he said. "There's things goes back a tidy way in these parts, but it's Christmas Day, and if I dunna get some sleep, I'st ne'er be fettled i' time."