

MEMORABLE CHRISTMAS

I was eleven years old, at boarding school, and just before Christmas I caught measles. I concealed this from the teachers because any boy with measles was forced to stay in the school sanatorium – even if this meant spending a lonely Christmas there. But they found me out just a day before the end of term.

The Headmaster, Mr. Maurice, was a fierce man, feared by the boys for his beatings. I still remember him noticing the red spots on my face and shouting, ‘You silly little boy.’ I was sent off to the school ‘san’ and told that I would not go home for Christmas. I lay there that night, thinking of the fireside of my parents’ home and the presents round the tree, and weeping into my pillow.

Paxton Court School was a peculiarly joyless place, wrapped for much of the winter in a dense fog which crept up from the River Medway. Even on the coldest of nights the windows would stay open, the old, thin curtains blowing about in the gale-force winds. It was supposed to be good for our health. Our letters home were read by Mr. Maurice, while the only books we were permitted to read were ones selected by him. And I was to spend Christmas there.

There were three other boys in the ‘san’. We were not even allowed to watch television. Mr. Maurice forbade any programme in which the characters spoke with an American accent. Comics, which I loved, were also forbidden. From my window I watched my school friends go home. On the morning of Christmas Eve I was filled with great homesickness as I read and re-read the same page of ‘With Kitchener to Khartoum’, one of Mr. Maurice’s ‘good books’. Lunch – the potatoes had an awful, synthetic quality, I remember, and the meat was cold – passed in silence.

Then, in the early afternoon, the school nurse walked briskly up to my bed. ‘Get up, Fisk, and put your clothes on,’ she ordered. ‘Your father is taking you home.’

Even today I can remember my joy. I don’t remember saying goodbye to the other three unhappy boys I was leaving behind. I just ran down the stairs and into the Headmaster’s study where my father was waiting. We drove to our warm home on the hill above East Farleigh. There were cowboy films on our new television, a pile of comics for me to read, and the family doctor who insisted the more television I watched, the quicker I would recover.

At bedtime my mother pushed the couch from the sitting room into my father’s study, where I slept beside a log fire and woke up on Christmas morning to frost on the windows and music on the radio. It was the best Christmas Day ever: never afterwards have I felt such relief.

J. Henderson, S. Reid, *Focus on FCE Practice Tests with Guidance*, Nelson

1.1. The author felt miserable at the end of term because

- A.** he was feeling bad from his illness.
- B.** he didn't want to remain at school.
- C.** he feared the Headmaster could beat him.
- D.** there were no Christmas presents for him.

1.2. Mr. Maurice had the habit of

- A.** throwing open the windows on cold nights.
- B.** watching certain American TV programmes.
- C.** reading what the boys wrote to their parents.
- D.** lending the boys his own books.

1.3. On Christmas Eve in the sanatorium the author

- A.** tried to read a 'permitted' book.
- B.** refused to eat the lunch provided.
- C.** was the only boy who hadn't left.
- D.** felt the measles symptoms worsen.

1.4. The family doctor seemed to think the best cure was

- A.** watching lots of television.
- B.** being comfortable at home.
- C.** sleeping beside a wood fire at night.
- D.** staying in bed until the weather got warmer.

1.5. The author has unhappy memories of his schooldays mainly because of

- A.** the lack of proper medical care for sick boys.
- B.** some teachers and their teaching methods.
- C.** the school's windy and foggy location.
- D.** the severity of the Headmaster.