

The best Christmas present in the world

There are some dates or periods of time in the history of the world that are so significant that everyone knows and remembers them. The story you will read mentions one such date and event: a war between the British and the Germans in 1914. Can you guess which war it was?



Do you know which events the dates below refer to?

- (a) 4 July 1776
- (b) 17 December 1903
- (c) 6 August 1945
- (d) 30 January 1948
- (e) 12 April 1961
- (f) 20 July 1969



I

I spotted it in a junk shop in Bridport, a roll-top desk. The man said it was early nineteenth century, and oak. I had wanted one, but they were far too expensive. This one was in a bad condition, the roll-top in several pieces, one leg clumsily mended, scorch marks all down one side. It was going for very little money. I thought I could restore it. It would be a risk, a challenge, but I had to have it. I paid the man and brought it back to my workroom at the back of the garage. I began work on it on Christmas Eve. I removed the roll-top completely and pulled out the drawers. The veneer had lifted almost everywhere – it looked like water damage to me. Both fire and water had clearly taken their toll on this desk. The last drawer was stuck fast. I tried all I could to ease it out gently. In the end I used brute force. I struck it sharply with the side of my fist and the drawer flew open to reveal a shallow space underneath, a secret drawer. There was something in there. I reached in and took out a small black tin box. Cello-taped to the top of it was a piece of lined notepaper, and written on it in shaky handwriting: "Jim's last letter, received January 25, 1915. To be buried with me when the time comes." I knew as I did it that it was wrong of me to open the box, but curiosity got the better of my scruples. It usually does. Inside the box there was an envelope. The address read: "Mrs Jim Macpherson, 12 Copper

Beeches, Bridport, Dorset." I took out the letter and unfolded it. It was written in pencil and dated at the top – "December 26, 1914".

Comprehension Check

1. What did the author find in a junk shop?
2. What did he find in a secret drawer? Who do you think had put it in there?

Summary:-

The Best Christmas Present in the World written by Michael Morpurgo is an emotion related to history. The author went to a junk shop in Bridport. He noticed a rolltop desk. It was very old and made of oak. It was in a bad condition. It had burn-marks down one side. Since it was cheap, the author decided to buy it and get it repaired. He began working on it on Christmas Eve He removed the roll-top and tried hard to pull out the drawer. It had suffered much damage due to fire and water. The drawer was jammed. He hit it hard with his fist and pulled it out. He found a secret drawer underneath. He took out a small black tin box. There was a note on it that said: "Jim's last letter, received January 25, 1915".

The letter writer also wished to put it in her grave. Out of curiosity he opened the box. Inside it he found an envelope with the address: "Mrs. Jim Macpherson, 12 Copper Beeches, Bridport, Dorset." The letter was dated Dec. 26, 1914. The letter had been written by Jim to his wife Connie. He was a soldier, set against the Germans during the First World War. Jim wrote to her that he was very happy because something wonderful had happened. The soldiers on both sides of the no man's land were taking up positions in their trenches. It was Christmas morning, cold and frosty.

Jim saw the German soldiers waving a white flag. They were calling out the English soldiers to say Happy Christmas. It was a big surprise to be greeted like friends by the enemies. But it was true, not a trick. The English soldiers also wished them in return.

The leader said that they wanted to celebrate the festival. Jim was the office in command. He allowed his men to join the Germans. Grey coats and Khaki coats mingled in the middle. In the time of war, they were making peace. The German soldier who came first was named Hans Wolf. Before joining the army, he used to play the cello in an orchestra. Jim had been a school teacher in Dorset. Hans lied that he knew Dorset well. In fact, he had read about that place in Hardy's novel, Far from the Madding Crowd.

The soldiers from the rival camps smoked, laughed, drank and feasted. Hans said that he liked the marzipan, the sweet covering on Jim's bread. Jim wrote in the letter, that he had never seen or imagined a Christmas Party like that. They played football also. Both agreed on one point. The countries should have better resolved their disputes by playing a football or cricket match because no one dies in a match whereas war leaves behind orphans and widows.

The game was finished, so did the drinks and cakes. Jim told Hans that they hoped to see families as soon as the fighting ended by Christmas next year.

The author put the letter back into the envelope and drove into Bridport. He meant to hand over the letter to Connie (Mrs. Macpherson). Connie was now 101 years old. Her house had caught fire, but she was saved. She was in a conservatory.

The author wished her 'Happy Christmas' and gave the letter to her. She recognised the writing of her husband and felt very happy. She mistook the author for Jim who had come home, as promised on Christmas. She kissed the author on the cheek and asked him to read the letter to her. She wanted to listen to the voice of her husband. She said that he (Jim) himself was the best Christmas present to her.

New words:-

- 1) England Roll-top desk- A writing desk with a flexible cover
- 2) Clumsily Mended- unprofessionally repaired as if by someone
- 3) Spotted it- saw it
- 4) Junk- Waste material
- 5) Clumsily -Awkwardly
- 6) Scorch marks -Burn marks
- 7) Veneer -A thin layer of plastic
- 8) Stuck fast -Shut tight
- 9) Scruples- Feelings that make you hesitate to do something wrong.
- 10) Trenches- Long deep holes in the ground where soldier hide from enemy
- 11) Parapet- High wall
- 12) Huddles- Heap
- 13) Stamping- Producing sound from your feet by patting on the ground
- 14) Orphan -Parentless Child

- 15) Muddle-headed Confused
- 16) Conservatory- Greenhouse
- 17) Suffused with- Glow of happiness
- 18) Mingling- Mixing
- 19) Was going for-Was selling for
- 20) Restore-Repair(here)
- 21) Initiating-Cause to begin (A process or action)

Moral of the story-Peace should be given preference over war.

Work sheet

Textbook questions-

1. Answer the following questions-

- a) For how long do you think Connie had kept Jim's letter? Give reasons for your answer.

- b) Why do you think the desk had been sold, and when?

- c) Why do Jim and Hans think that games or sports are good ways of resolving conflicts? Do you agree?

d) Do you think the soldiers of the two armies are like each other, or different from each other? Find evidence from the story to support your answer.

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