

# The Christmas Cake (1942)

BY BETTY ANDREW  
Special to The Tanner

Christmas means different things at different times, and this time was England during the Second World War.

Hitler was trying to "beat the hell out of us" with the bombing, then the doodle-bugs, and finally the rockets. There were people worse off than us - the merchant navy with our old ships *not* built for speed, escorted only part of the way out from English ports, then left to fend for themselves. They ran the gauntlet of the German submarines and their torpedoes, and the terrible Atlantic Ocean storms, bringing back oil, armaments, and food that we, the people, so desperately needed to fight the war.

One day in early autumn, the school assembled in the hall as usual, for hymns, prayers and announcements of the events of the day. Mrs. Wilder, our head mistress, announced we were adopting a merchant ship. Loud cheers and great excitement greeted this. Now we were doing our bit for the war effort.

So we wrote letters, designed cards in art classes, and learned to knit. We started with scarves, long uneven things, knitted with oiled wool. Next were mittens.

Then we were asked to knit balaclavas - hoods that protected necks, ears and shoulders. The knitting got more difficult as we tried socks with the same thick wool. When we got to the heels, cries of help went to our mums and aunts. This brought us closer as they talked of their men at war, their efforts in the factories or of happier times.

As November approached, the school staff suggested we make a Christmas cake for our courageous crew. So the call for assistance was made. Despite the fact that we were severely rationed, eggs from backyard chickens, butter, and sugar were sent in. And although we were short of dried fruit and had no lemons or oranges, someone sent in a wee drop of brandy. A lot of grated carrot went into that cake as our teacher learned to substitute and make do.

I was in the senior class and we had the pleasure of chopping, beating, mixing and lining the cake tin. Our teacher took over the final mixing and then we all had a stir and a wish. I'm sure most of our wishes were for the safety of our adopted crew.

The cake was put in the oven to bake; we hadn't smelled anything as rich for a couple of years. The students

wandered around sniffing the aroma like the Bisto kids, and tried to peek through the cookery class door. Eventually it was out and cooling, waiting to be iced. Luckily there was enough icing sugar to cover the cake, and the local sweet shop, hearing of our endeavour, found some suitable decorations - ships and blue icing for the sea.

All the classes were taken down, class by class, to admire the finished cake. Then there was a final great spurt of letter writing, Christmas cards, and small gifts, which were all packed and sent off. How the General Post Office found all these ships, and handed out the right parcels was a miracle in itself, but there were lots of little miracles happening in those times.

Our courageous ship's crew *did* get through that winter, as the captain and some of his crew came to our school the next summer. No gold braid or medals, but smart with highly polished shoes and red faces, when facing the whole girls' school in the hall, and thanking us for all the knitting, letters and the marvellous cake.

We sang our hearts out, but the fact that our prayers and love had kept them safe was our greatest reward.

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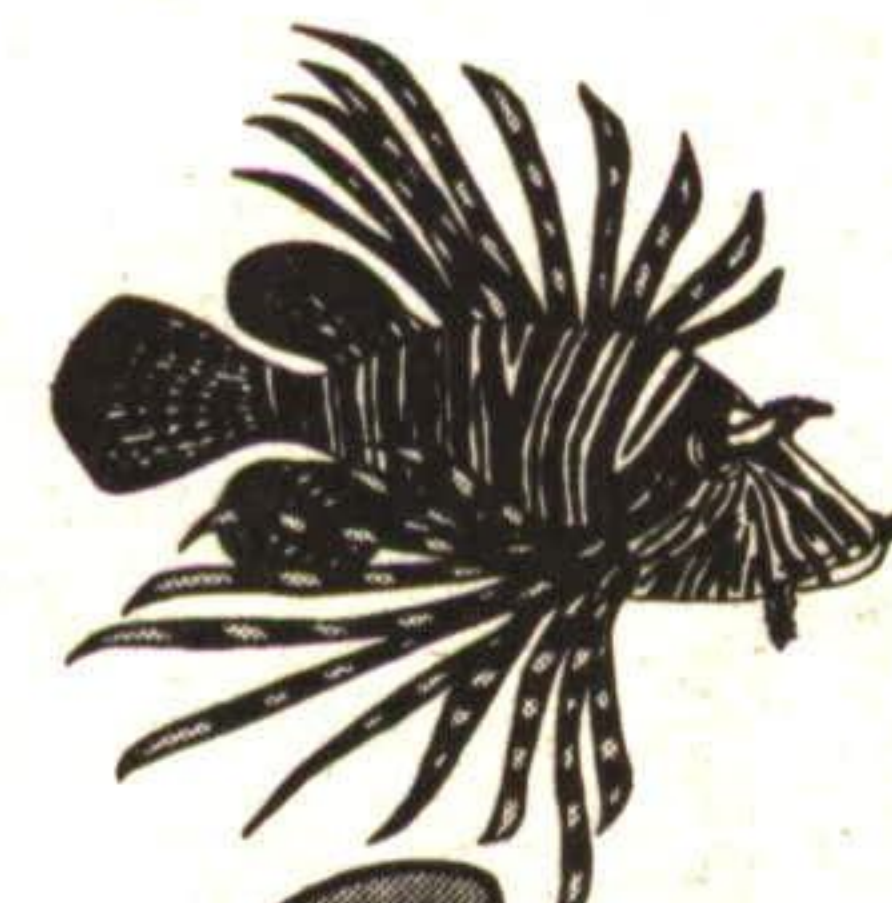
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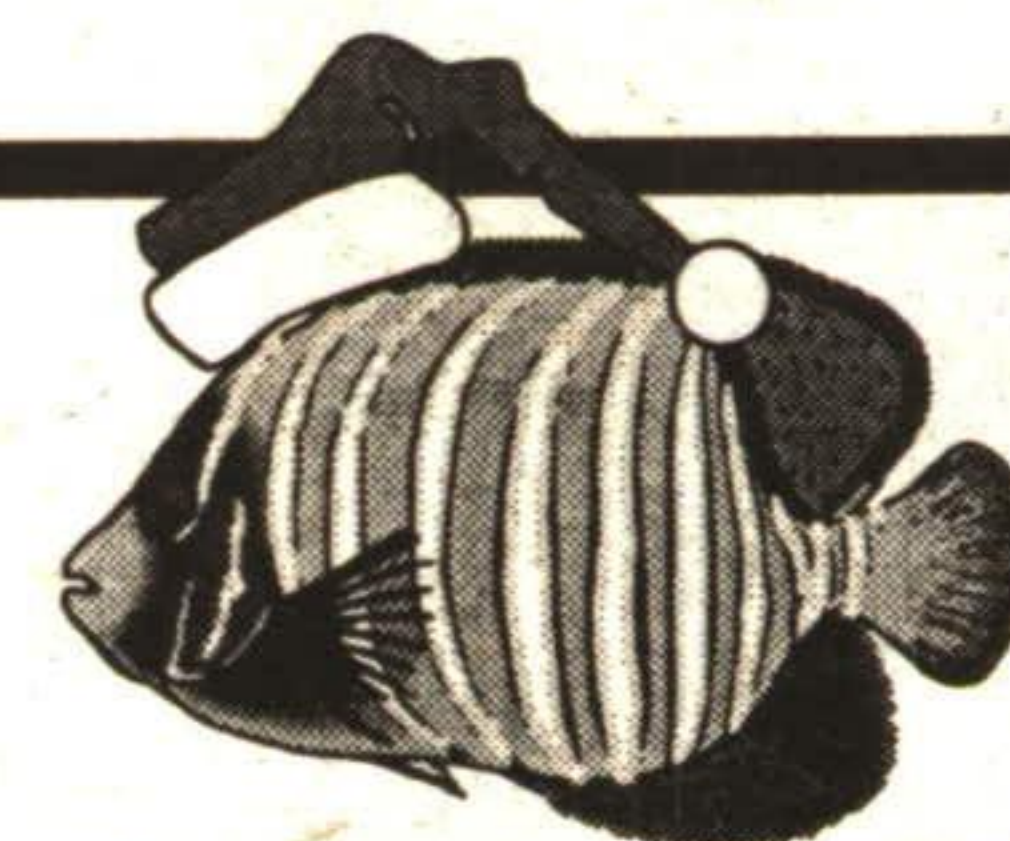
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