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Celebrating Christmas Properly
Pages 370-375

There is no more dangerous or disgusting habit than that of celebrating Christmas before it comes, as I am doing in this article. It is the very essence of a festival that it breaks upon one brilliantly and abruptly, that at one moment the great day is not and the next moment the great day is. Up to a certain specific instant you are feeling ordinary and sad; for it is only Wednesday. At the next moment your heart leaps up and your soul and body dance together like lovers; for in one burst and blaze it has become Thursday. I am assuming (of course) that you are a worshipper of Thor, and that you celebrate his day once a week, possibly with human sacrifice. If, on the other hand, you are a modern Christian Englishman, you hail (of course) with the same explosion of gaiety the appearance of the English Sunday. But I say that whatever the day is that is to you festive or symbolic, it is essential that there should be a quite clear black line between it and the time going before. And all the old wholesome customs in connection with Christmas were to the effect that one should not touch or see or know or speak of something before the actual coming of Christmas Day. Thus, for instance, children were never given their presents until the actual coming of the appointed hour. The presents were kept tied up in brown-paper parcels, out of which an arm of a doll or the leg of a donkey sometimes accidentally stuck. I wish this principle were adopted in respect of modern Christmas ceremonies and publications. Especially it ought to be observed in connection with what are called the Christmas numbers of magazines. The editors of the magazines bring out their Christmas numbers so long before the time that the reader is more likely to be still lamenting for the turkey of last year than to have seriously settled down to a solid anticipation of the turkey which is to come. Christmas numbers of magazines ought to be tied up in brown paper and kept for Christmas Day. On consideration, I should favour the editors being tied up in brown paper. Whether the leg or arm of an editor should ever be allowed to protrude I leave to individual choice.

Of course, all this secrecy about Christmas is merely sentimental and ceremonial; if you do not like what is sentimental and ceremonial, do not celebrate Christmas at all. You will not be punished if you don't; also, since we are no longer ruled by those sturdy Puritans who won for us civil and religious liberty, you will not even be punished if you do. But I cannot understand why anyone should bother about a ceremonial except ceremonially. If a thing only exists in order to be graceful, do it gracefully or do not do it. If a thing only exists as something professing to be solemn, do it solemnly or do not do it. There is no sense in doing it slouchingly; nor is there even any liberty. I can understand the man who takes off his hat to a lady because it is the customary symbol. I can understand him, I say; in fact, I know him quite intimately. I can also understand the man who refuses to take off his hat to a lady, like the old Quakers, because he thinks that a symbol is superstition. But what point would there be in so performing an arbitrary form of respect that it was not a form of respect? We respect the gentleman who takes off his hat to the lady; we respect the fanatic who will not take off his hat to the lady. But what should we think of the man who kept his hands in his pockets and asked the lady to take his hat off for him because he felt tired?

This is combining insolence and superstition; and the modern world is full of the strange combination. There is no mark of the immense weak-mindedness of modernity that is more striking than this general disposition to keep up old forms, but to keep them up informally and feebly. Why take something which was only meant to be respectful and preserve it disrespectfully? Why take something which you could easily abolish as a superstition and carefully perpetuate it as a bore? There have been many instances of this half-witted compromise. Was it not true, for instance, that the other day some mad American was trying to buy

Glastonbury Abbey¹ and transfer it stone by stone to America? Such things are not only illogical, but idiotic. There is no particular reason why a pushing American financier should pay respect to Glastonbury Abbey at all. But if he is to pay respect to Glastonbury Abbey, he must pay respect to Glastonbury. If it is a matter of sentiment, why should he spoil the scene? If it is not a matter of sentiment, why should he ever have visited the scene? To call this kind of thing Vandalism is a very inadequate and unfair description. The Vandals were very sensitive people. They did not believe in a religion, and so they insulted it; they did not see any use for certain buildings, and so they knocked them down. But they were not such fools as to encumber their march with the fragments of the edifice they had themselves spoilt. They were at least superior to the modern American mode of reasoning. They did not desecrate the stones because they held them sacred.

Another instance of the same illogicality I observed the other day at some kind of "At Home." I saw what appeared to be a human being dressed in a black evening-coat, black dress-waist-coat, and black dress-trousers, but with a shirt-front made of Jaeger wool. What can be the sense of this sort of thing? If a man thinks hygiene more important than convention (a selfish and heathen view, for the beasts that perish are more hygienic than man, and man is only above them because he is more conventional), if, I say, a man thinks that hygiene is more important than convention, what on earth is there to oblige him to wear a shirt-front at all? But to take a costume of which the only conceivable cause or advantage is that it is a sort of uniform, and then not wear it in the uniform way—this is to be neither a Bohemian nor a gentleman. It is a foolish affectation, I think, in an English officer of the Life Guards never to wear his uniform if he can help it. But it would be more foolish still if he showed himself about town in a scarlet coat and a Jaeger breast-plate. It is the custom nowadays to have Ritual Commissions and Ritual Reports² to make rather unmeaning compromises in the ceremonial of the Church of England. So perhaps we shall have an ecclesiastical compromise by which all the Bishops shall wear Jaeger capes and Jaeger mitres. Similarly the King might insist on having a Jaeger crown. But I do not think he will, for he understands the logic of the matter better than that. The modern monarch, like a reasonable fellow, wears his crown as seldom as he can; but if he does it at all, then the only point of a crown is that it is a crown. So let me assure the unknown gentleman in the woollen vesture that the only point of a white shirt-front is that it is a white shirt-front. Stiffness may be its impossible defect; but it is certainly its only possible merit.

Let us be consistent, therefore, about Christmas, and either keep customs or not keep them. If you do not like sentiment and symbolism, you do not like Christmas; go away and celebrate something else; I should suggest the birthday of Mr. McCabe.³ No doubt you could have a sort of scientific Christmas with a hygienic pudding and highly instructive presents stuffed into a Jaeger stocking; go and have it then. If you like those things, doubtless you are a good sort of fellow, and your intentions are excellent. I have no doubt that you are really interested in humanity; but I cannot think that humanity will ever be much interested in you. Humanity is unhygienic from its very nature and beginning. It is so much an exception in Nature that the laws of Nature really mean nothing to it. If Man is not a divinity, then Man is a disease. Either he is the image of God, or else he is the one animal which has gone mad.

The matter of hygiene brings us back to Christmas; Christmas and hygiene are commonly in some antagonism, and I, for one, am heartily on the side of Christmas. Glancing down a newspaper column I see the following alarming sentence: "The Lancet⁴ adds a frightful corollary that the only way to eat Christmas pudding with perfect impunity is to eat it alone." At first the meaning of this sentence deceived me. I thought it meant that the eater of Christmas pudding must be in a state of sacred isolation like an anchorite at prayer. I thought it meant that the presence of one's fellow creatures in some way disturbed the subtle nervous and digestive process through which Christmas pudding was beneficent. It sounded rather mad and wicked, certainly;

but not madder or more wicked than many other things that I have read in scientific journals. But on re-reading the passage, I see that my first impression did the Lancet an injustice. The sentence really means that when one eats Christmas pudding one should eat nothing but Christmas pudding. "It is," says the Lancet, "a complete meal in itself." This is, I should say, a question of natural capacity, not to say of cubic capacity. I know a kind of person who would find one Christmas pudding a complete meal in itself, and even a little over. For my own part, I should say that three, or perhaps four, Christmas puddings might be said to constitute a complete meal in themselves. But, in any case, this sudden conversion of science to plum-pudding is a fine example of the fickleness of the human intellect and the steadiness of the human appetite. Scientific theories change, but the plum-pudding remains the same, century after century (I do not mean the individual pudding, but the type), a permanent monument of human mysticism and human mirth. If there is one thing more than another which from our childhood we have heard was grossly unwholesome and opposed to all medical advice, that thing certainly was Christmas pudding. Now it seems, (again by the best medical advice) that to call Christmas pudding wholesome is entirely a faint and approximate expression of its merits. Not only is Christmas pudding wholesome, but it is so peculiarly and incomparably wholesome that no other and less medical substance must be taken with it so as to spoil its perfect medical effect. Who shall decide when doctors disagree—with themselves? The doctors will always disagree and humanity will always decide.

1 Supposed to house the tomb of King Arthur. Glastonbury is also the town in Somerset where, it is said, Joseph of Arimathea, traveling with the Holy Grail, struck his staff in the ground, where it rooted; since then, the holy thorn is said to blossom at every Christmastime.

2 The controversy over ceremonial practices in the Church of England had been going on for at least a century; in 1867 a Ritual Commission had been appointed, and it had issued four reports from 1867 to 1870, their conclusions being used as a basis for a Public Worship Regulation Act of 1874, aimed at suppressing the growth of ritualism. The quarrel continued, however, reaching another peak in the 1890s.

3 Joseph Martin McCabe (1867-1955) was a rationalist who founded the Rationalist Press Association in 1899; he was a lecturer, journalist and author for the rationalist cause.

4 The important British medical periodical founded in 1823.