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The Survival of Christmas
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There are two methods of advertisement in the world. One is to advertise something by saying that it is succeeding. The other is to advertise a thing by saying that it is failing. You can advertise ordinary sermons by calling them the New Theology; or on the other hand one can advertise an ordinary flower by asserting (on your personal word of honour) that it is the Last Rose of Summer. The entrance of a thing into the world, or its departure from the world, are the great opportunities for praising it; that is why all healthy men and women have always felt that christenings and funerals were such fun. But in the area of strict advertisement the thing is equally true; you can push a thing by saying that it is coming on; but you can also push a thing by saying that it is going away. To take any two obvious examples: it is an advertisement to say "Positively Largest Circulation" of a newspaper. It is an advertisement also to say "Positively Last Appearance" of an actor. There is, however, a very important distinction between these two methods. If you are going to announce a thing as a failure, it must be a good thing. If you are going to attract attention to the last rose of summer, you must only do it when a long and historical human experience leads you to believe that mankind is really rather fond of roses. You must not play that game with soap, or any slight, faddish, secondary sort of thing. The sunset is poetical because the sun is popular. Even a slowly fading fire of wood or coal is a thing that can attract people to its last red embers; they will linger over it because real fire is in itself a fine thing. But if you have hot-water pipes in your house (which God forbid), do not, in a light and hospitable manner, ask your friends to come and put their fingers on the hot-water pipes and feel them gradually cooling. It is not the same thing. Fires are nice things, and when half-cold are still poetic; hot-water pipes are nasty things, and the sooner they cool the better. You must be quite certain of the real merit of a thing before you risk a declaration that it is dying. If a thing is weak, insist on its enormous success; it is your only chance. But if a thing is strong, insist that it is defeated.

By this simple principle we can find a really workable division between the two chief types of human institutions. Really healthy institutions are always supposed to be dying—like nations. Thoroughly diseased institutions are always praised as being in a state of brutal and invincible health—like empires. When an Englishman, whether Tory or Radical, wants to praise England he says that England is going to the dogs; that the sturdy English are gone. But when a British Imperialist—whether German, Austrian, Polish, Jewish, or American—wishes to praise the British Empire, he says that it is going ahead like a house on fire, and that nothing can stop its success. He says that because he does not really believe in the British Empire at all; he knows that the optimistic advertisement is the only tip in the case of a shaky piece of goods. But the English patriot, whether Tory or Radical, knows that there is a real sound article called England, and he tells people to snap it up before it has vanished, instead of telling them to buy it merely because it has a boom. This is only one example; but the principle is of universal application. People attached to things they do care about tend to fear for them. People attached to things they do not care about tend to brag about them. Lovers tend to be sad. Commercial travellers tend to be artificially and inhumanly cheerful.

I have been reminded of all this by the inevitable discussions in the current papers about whether the keeping of Christmas is destined to die out, whether Christmas itself will disappear. Of course, Christmas will not disappear. Christmas is one of those very strong things that can afford to boast of its own approaching disappearance. Santa Claus is an actor who can always have a "positively last appearance" with advantage to himself; because people really want him. Weak things must boast of being new, like so many new German philosophies. But strong things

can boast of being old. Strong things can boast of being moribund. In the case of Christmas it is quite easy to put a simple test. All the great writers who have praised Christmas customs have praised them as antiquated customs. All the authors who have eulogised Father Christmas have eulogised him as a very elderly gentleman. Now, there is no man who believes in tradition more than, I do. Tradition (it seems to me) is simply the democracy of the dead. But there is a certain kind of tradition which, while it is immensely valuable, is obviously, by reason of its own eternal renewal, not quite accurate. If tradition records that things have been growing more and more hot or cold or blue or triangular, then the longer the tradition has been going on the more clear it must be that it is not quite true. Supposing that your father and grandfather and great-grandfather and great-great-grandfather had all left it on record that the sun in the sky was growing smaller before their very eyes, then I think we should not believe it; not because we are any wiser than they, but because if that had been the exact truth there would not by this time be any sun at all. So that when we find our fathers perpetually saying age after age that religion is dying, that religious festivity is dying, that the hearty human customs are dying, I think we are justified in saying that they were mistaken, not in their praise, but in their despair. The truth was that religion, being really a good thing, could thrive as a continual failure; just as it would be quite worth a brewer's while to announce the last cask of real ale in England.

The Christmas celebrations will certainly remain, and will certainly survive any attempt by modern artists, idealists, neo-pagans to substitute anything else for them. For the truth is that there is an alliance between religion and real fun, of which the modern thinkers have never got the key, and which they are quite unable to criticise or to destroy. All Socialist Utopias, all new Pagan Paradises, promised in this age to mankind have all one horrible fault. They are all dignified. All the men in William Morris are dignified. All the men even in H. G. Wells are dignified, when they are men at all. But being undignified is the essence of all real happiness, whether before God or man. Hilarity involves humility; nay, it involves humiliation. Anyone can prove for himself this spiritual principle before a month is out, by walking about in the actual cap that he really found in the cracker.¹ Religion is much nearer to riotous happiness than it is to the detached and temperate types of happiness in which gentlemen and philosophers find their peace. Religion and riot are very near, as the history of all religions proves. Riot means being a rotter; and religion means knowing you are a rotter. Somebody said, and it has often been quoted: "Be good and you will be happy; but you will not have a jolly time." The epigram is witty, but it is profoundly mistaken in its estimate of the truth of human nature. I should be inclined to say that the truth is exactly the reverse. Be good and you will have a jolly time; but you will not be happy. If you have a good heart you will always have some lightness of heart; you will always have the power of enjoying special human feasts, and positive human good news. But the heart which is there to be lightened will also be there to be hurt; and really if you only want to be happy, to be steadily and stupidly happy like the animals, it may be well worth your while not to have a heart at all. Fortunately, however, being happy is not so important as having a jolly time. Philosophers are happy; saints have a jolly time. The important thing in life is not to keep a steady system of pleasure and composure (which can be done quite well by hardening one's heart or thickening one's head), but to keep alive in oneself the immortal power of astonishment and laughter, and a kind of young reverence. This is why religion always insists on special days like Christmas, while philosophy always tends to despise them. Religion is interested not in whether a man is happy, but whether he is still alive, whether he can still react in a normal way to new things, whether he blinks in a blinding light or laughs when he is tickled. That is the best of Christmas, that it is a startling and disturbing happiness; it is an uncomfortable comfort. The Christmas customs destroy the human habits. And while customs are generally unselfish, habits are nearly always selfish. The object of the religious festival is, as I have said, to find out if a happy man is still alive. A man can smile when he is dead. Composure, resignation, and the most exquisite good manners are, so to speak, the strong points of corpses. There is only one way in which you can test his real

vitality, and that is by a special festival. Explode crackers in his ear, and see if he jumps. Prick him with holly, and see if he feels it. If not, he is dead, or, as he would put it, is "living the higher life."

For in this matter, as in nearly all modern matters, we must continually remember the question I think I mentioned recently in connection with Francis Thompson and religious symbolism. When we talk of things like Christmas we must remember what we have to compare them to. It is not a question between Christmas ceremonies and a free, pure life: it is a question between Christmas ceremonies and vulgar society ceremonies; between the exciting conventions of a pantomime and the dull conventions of a dinner-table. It is not Christmas against liberty. Though if it were I should still choose Christmas.

1 At birthday or Christmas parties, small paper containers holding party hats and other prizes are "pulled", thus making a loud noise and revealing their contents.