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G. K. Chesterton writes about **CHRISTMAS AND SPORT**

turned them into pots of honey, instead of leaving them with the dismal distinction of having pots of money.

Plutocrat-in-the-Corner

Some great millionaire, equipped with the brain of steel and the will of iron which are part of the apparatus of his profession, might none the less be required to play one of the old nursery games. He might be condemned to playing Puss-in-the-Corner instead of playing Plutocrat-in-the-Corner; in whatever wheat corner or milk corner he might be at the moment benefitting mankind.

The whole idea of these old childish games was to make everybody look childish; and the results were not only great fun, but really funny. But if you had the antiquarian curiosity to ask why there was this tradition of people being childish, you would trace it back to a tremendous, a mysterious, and even a paradoxical doctrine, that on this strange night even God became a child.

Trivial Basis

Now if we look at the games now generally substituted for the games of Christmas, we shall find the exact contrary. We shall find that the basis is entirely trivial; but that the tower of solemnity erected on that trifle is as enormous as the Tower of Babel.

I would not make any antithesis between golf and God; lest some of the most serious Scotsmen should be tempted to deny their Creator. But, if I may take the game of golf as typical, I think it is a fairly illuminating type. The actual aim and origin of golf is to put a very small pellet in a very small pocket. There is nothing large or elemental or imaginative about the materials of the thing; it is not throwing a great rock into a great abyss. It possesses about the correctitude of put-

ting a pill back into a pill-box, and rather less than the excitement of blowing a pea out of a pea-shooter.

That, I mean, is what it is in itself. But when we come to consider what has been made of it, we are faced with an array of awful and almost appalling intellectual responsibilities, which make me shudder even as I touch on the topic.

Enjoyed—and Forgotten

The natural destiny of a game is to be enjoyed and to be forgotten. It is horribly certain that modern games are not forgotten, and it is allowable to doubt whether they are in this sense enjoyed.

An enormous superstructure of work and worry and specialism and expenditure has been reared above these grown-up games; though their substantial subject-matter is every bit as slight and trivial as that of the childish games. I wonder whether the time will come when a man has to pay about ten guineas to join the Puss-in-the-Corner Club; or has to purchase a huge apparatus in order to Hunt-the-Slipper; or must wait till he is a very wealthy man of about 50 or 60 before he can play hide-and-seek.

Christmas taught people to feast on a feast-day, and to be as funny as possible while the fun was going; and it did this because there was a real reason for doing it. But our modern fun has grown more solemn than solemnity itself; because there is no reason for it at all.

THE difference between Christmas and most modern games or sports is essentially this: Christmas is frivolous on top and serious underneath; while sport is serious on top and frivolous underneath. The first is like finding froth on the top of a strong ale; the second is like finding unliberated gases bubbling at the bottom of a much heavier drink.

The old games of Christmas were all conceived with the idea of men making fools of themselves; but this alone involves a rather solemn preliminary problem; about whether they are fools already. But the idea was that of the Saturnalia, or dignity becoming undignified; and that is exactly the difference between Saturnalia and Satanism.

Solid and solemn city men, let us say, were required to take part in the game of "Honey pots," which involves sitting on the floor, hunched up in a squatting attitude at the risk of being rolled over, as if the fairies had indeed

ON CHRISTMAS

"All ceremony depends on symbol; and all symbols have been vulgarised and made stale by the commercial conditions of our time."

— GKC, "The Rituals of Christmas"

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“THE FESTIVAL AND THE FOG”

Chesterton, G. K.. For *The Daily News*, 24 December 1904.

There seems to be a sort of prejudice against the fog; and I found very few sympathisers yesterday when I walked round Victoria Station pointing out its beauties in warm but well-chosen words. To the poetical I pointed out that we were in some sense in the core of a coloured cloud. To the merely pictorial or aesthetic I urged the subtlety and quietude of its art colours, exquisite browns and dying greens that had not yet become grey; nothing garish, nothing early Victorian. But to the moral and religious (who were mostly waiting for a train for Battersea five hours late and cursing very much) I struck a deeper note. I pointed out, what must surely be obvious after all, that the fog is the one really romantic thing that the town has left us. The people who are trying to take away the London fogs I regard as vandals, as I should regard anyone else who was for pulling down some dim mysterious thing, some sepulchre, some cathedral. When people tell me that a Norman church must be pulled down because it stands in the way of the omnibuses I say, in my simple way, that surely it would be easier to pull down the omnibuses. And the fog really is not only a poetry, but necessity to our civic race. Without it we should never experience at all that divinest of natural things except light, darkness. Without it we should never know the most Godlike of all things except love, loneliness. We have deliberately killed in our cities the possibility of the healthy darkness, the clean and jolly darkness of the lanes and fields. We have made a little solar system of our own to fight against it and keep it off for ever. The people round me in Battersea have never seen darkness any more than they have seen a sea-serpent. The result is that they have a beautiful substitute, sent (indirectly) by God. As man has made his own sun and his own stars, so man against his will has been made to make his own darkness.

And this falls in so fortunately with Christmas, which is essentially a winter feast, since it is only winter or some such reality which can make all men feel fraternal. In a recent article on the equity of men I mentioned only death as creating this rigid bond. I might have mentioned fog. The man who comes looming out of the fog to us is always the first man made. He is the authentic image of God, speaking our own secret and extraordinary tongue, especially if we have lost the way. The main point of the Christmas poetry is this idea of the dark and desolate background of winter. It is against that black behind that are kindled the fires of the fierce human festivity. We assert the divinity of man by the fact that when mere Nature is most sad we are most happy. And all the good Christmas customs have this quality of the capture of good out of ill.

There is one game, for instance, which we tottering old fellows remember, which ought to be regarded as living parable of the human lot at its highest. It is a game called "Snapdragon"; its very name is a fairy tale, and it is made out of the two most poetical things in the material world, fire and things to eat. Now there are in the world, I believe, people who think it silly to snatch raisins out of blue flames and then eat them; but they are quite wrong from the highest spiritual and philosophic point of view. So far from it being silly to eat raisins out of a blue conflagration, it is rather silly to eat them in any other way. So far from the Snapdragon principle being ousted from the Christmas feasts, it ought to be extended to all other feasts whatever. The whole object of poetry and mysticism, the whole object of all religions and of all philosophies not invented by the devil, is to make us value good things. Thus all methods or customs which surround the gaining of good things by any risk or difficulty are popular; that is to say, valued by the sub-conscious mind of men. Thus hunting is popular, more popular than judged here; thus shooting is popular, more popular than partridge. But why adopt these doubtful and even cruel methods of making good things distant or dangerous, when the excellent Snapdragon method is easily within the power of modern ingenuity and civilization? Let the old Major at the club recreate the thrills of his early days at the front. Let him snatch his mutton cutlet out of a sea of fire. Let the luxurious lady take her muffins off a red-hot shovel, respectfully extended towards her. Let the old gourmet who desires to have his bottle of Chateau Lafitte with "the chill off" be obliged to plunge into a tank of boiling water and come up with the bottle clasped to his bosom. He would value the wine much more; every drop of it would be like a ruby saved from the burning house. Every great legend, every great faith, has this idea in it. The Noah's Ark, to take the random example, has its permanent place in the books of religion and in the hearts of children, both because it contains all the animals in the world, but because it contains them all saved from the sea. We value such living things not when we realise that they are living, but rather (so to speak) when we realise that they are not dead. To take a larger example, this spirit is responsible for the enduring power of revivalism, which consists in the fact that it makes us look at some commonplace man with whiskers, suddenly and admiringly as a brand from the burning. But everything is a brand from the burning. Everything might not have been. Every man was nearly killed in the hour when he was born. And if on Christmas Day, in some sensible and enduring Christian household, we snatch raisins as brands from the burning, we are only snatching them as we snatch all earthly things.

The whole of the Christmas ritual was created with a sure instinct for joy, like nearly all the ancient fasts of the ancient faiths. And in nothing is its instinct for enjoyment expressed so much as in this element which I have noticed in the game of snapdragon. It realises that great thing which men and children enjoy more than

beauty or banquets--limitation. A thing given only at a certain time or in a certain manner, or even after a certain difficulty, is always better than a thing given without those restrictions. The part is greater than the whole. What sufferings have I not myself undergone in the last two or three days through restraining myself from looking into a brown paper parcel which will be given to me next Sunday! It looks like a drum. But it may only be a cheese. But this limitation is, again, one which it would be much better enforced in connection with a great many other things. The moderns say that it is very illiberal to have a Sabbath or a day for religion--that one ought to extend one's religion over all days and hours; but I am not quite sure that it should not be a very good thing to have a Sacred Day of Smoking or a Sabbath of Eating Sweets or a Grand Festival for wearing a flower in one's buttonhole. For the great value of temperance is not that it increases restraint, but that it increases enjoyment.

The essence of the above remarks is that every festival is at once the enjoyment of something and the sacrifice of something. I have, in a humble way proved this myself by substituting the above article for the article which I ought to have written in continuation of my remarks on the definition of the word gentleman. But who can imagine talking about the idea of a gentleman at such a time as this? Who can imagine even talking against the idea of a gentleman at such a time? Let anyone who thinks that mince pies are not indigestible for this hour enjoy his illusion; let anyone who thinks he is a gentleman enjoy his also. The man who came out of the fog last night with a great torch to help my cabman along was not (I think) a gentleman. He was not even a man. He was a god.

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“A MERRY CHRISTMAS”

Chesterton, G. K.. For *The Daily News*, 23 December 1911.

In the dark house of infancy I can still darkly trace the outline of an aged member of my family, more than one of whose phrases have lingered in the later generations. In his creed and atmosphere he was what I should call Puritan. He was one of the last of the old Wesleyans and one of the first of the new Total Abstiners. But because he belonged to the old England rather than the new, there was a certain heartiness in his prejudices and preferences. And one of the things against which, Puritan as he was, he had a hearty prejudice, was people saying "A Happy Christmas" instead of "A Merry Christmas." In his youth, he said it was always a Merry Christmas; and, with one foot in the grave, he considered it an impertinence to suggest that he was not still in his youth. If he had lived long enough he might have seen the noble ideal of merriment sink even lower than the comparatively

vulgar ideal of happiness. The sects or heresies since his time do not make or buy or send Christmas cards at all. But how horrible they would be if they could be sent. The Theosophists, as their name implies, would wish us "A Wise Christmas." The Pessimists (between arabesques of holly and mistletoe) would wish us "A Resigned Christmas." The Supermen, an unlucky little Puritan sect, would wish us "A Strong Christmas." But then the Supermen are by their nature incapable of corporate action; and their tall, tempestuous card, full of Titans and waterspouts, would never be printed at all.

On the whole I range myself on the side of my faintly remembered forebear. I am on the side of "merry" against "happy." At any rate, I am very certain of one thing. Some persons, for some reasons, did call ancient England "Merry England." No person, for any reason, has ever dared to call modern England "Happy England." Moreover, the word "happy" may apply to an infinite number of levels or platforms above that of pure despair. The word "merry" cannot be used of any people except people in a certain pacific temperature of high spirits. We may talk of people being negatively happy. Nobody could talk of people being negatively merry. Merriment is a positive victory and, like most positive victories, it is rare.

On this, as on most other subjects, the cynic is wrong; and the cynic is most wrong when he is really a wit. One cynic (who was certainly a wit) said, "Be good and you will be happy, but you will not have a jolly time." This epigram has every intellectual merit except truth, for, curiously enough, it is the exact opposite of the truth. The psychological truth of the matter is something like this: "Be good and you will be unhappy; but you will always be capable of having a jolly time. Even if you have had a miserable year, you may still have a merry Christmas - merry, not happy." Satisfied and secure happiness does not come to him that has taken up his cross or taken up his common day's work. Satisfied and secure happiness comes to him who has taken up his neighbour's landmark; to him who has taken bribes, to him who has taken drugs, most of all, perhaps, to him who has taken his own life. Solid, stolid happiness is a morbid symptom. It means paralysis or drunkenness or death or philosophy that is worse than death. In such cases the power to be happy may mean little more than the incapacity to be unhappy; indeed, it will generally be found that the impotence for tears goes along with the impotence for laughter.

But "A Merry Christmas" is quite a different question. The power of expressing, not negative happiness, but positive hilarity, that is a thing which we all know when we see it--or even when we hear it, half a mile down the road. It is this power of rising into the seventh heaven of mere temper the moment a strain is relaxed; of being cut loose like a captive balloon or springing skyward like a released

rocket, that is really the reward of virtue. It is not the power of saying, "Let us feast; for tomorrow we die." It is the power of saying, "Let us fast; for tomorrow we feast."

This the true meaning of that concentration on special days, on special seasons of rejoicing which has always marked not only the highest but the most high-spirited societies. This is what has especially marked our own European society, both pagan and Christian. Our joy of life has always risen into peaks and towers and turrets, into superhuman exceptions; exceptions which really prove the rule. Our art has always been religious art, in the literal sense of being restricted and dedicated. Our poetry has always been occasional poetry, in the true sense of being written for an occasion. That is why "A Merry Christmas" was the right inscription and "A Happy Christmas" was the beginning of our decadence. The phrase "happy" in that connection was no more than any good man should wish another for any day of his life. To tell everyone to be happy might be to make oneself responsible for an Utopia, a light enterprise. But to tell everyone to be merry is to make oneself responsible for a Saturnalia, a sacred responsibility, only to be undertaken once a year.

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"ON GENERALIZING CHRISTMAS"

Chesterton, G. K.. For *The Illustrated London News*, 30 December 1922.

I do not know whether this article will appear before Christmas in the ordinary sense of Christmas Day, but it will probably appear before the end of Christmas in the old sense of the holiday that continues in a crescendo of festivity until Twelfth Night. In any case, the real Christmas article ought to appear after Christmas Day, which is the first day appropriate to the festive mood. Most of the articles that appear are necessarily anticipations and not experiences; and it is very characteristic of the modern mind that it should have this Futurist note even in its festivity. It finds it easier to prophesy Christmas like a Utopia than to enjoy it like a Saturnalia. But I am one of those who have the luck to like the older and more positive enjoyment, and for whom the *redeunt Saturnia regna* does not always need to be transferred from the present to the future tense of the Latin verb. And it is in itself a reminder of a rather interesting question, the question of the attempt to preserve the Christmas tradition as a merely human and in that sense a merely heathen thing. One of the most interesting attempts of this kind was made some years ago by Mr. Arnold Bennett in a little book called "The Feast of St. Friend." It was, as might be expected, a very thoughtful and humane production; its motive was wholly charitable, and I would here desire to write of it charitably, especially in the season of charity. But I do not think it uncharitable to point out that it involved, like all other attempts of the same

kind, a fallacy about human nature of considerable practical importance to the future of human society.

Mr. Arnold Bennett began, indeed, by eliminating the more mystical elements in Christmas by a device of curious and almost creepy simplicity. He alluded to the fact that the 25th of December was the traditional date of the Nativity of Jesus Christ, and then thought it enough to say that it probably was not the historical date at all. There is a sort of innocence in this which I cannot but feel as faintly amusing, despite the seriousness of this aspect of the subject. Some light on the logic of the process may be thrown by merely imagining it applied to any other festival, even the most strictly secular and social festival. Suppose it were discovered that by some error in an official document the Battle of Trafalgar had been attributed to Oct. 21 when it was really fought on Oct. 23. It would surely be a rather extraordinary argument to deduce from this that Trafalgar Day need have nothing to do with Nelson, nothing to do with naval glory, nothing to do with patriotism, nothing to do with England. It would be rather odd to argue that because of this shuffling of dates any Cosmopolitan, any Continental enemy of England, any Internationalist who hated all flags, any Pacifist who hated all fighting, had just as much to do with Trafalgar as an English sailor. It would be a strange sort of logic to insist that this mere chronological correction had actually emptied the festival of all reference or relation to the death of Nelson and the cause for which he died. The French celebrate the memory of their great democratic crusade, at the end of the eighteenth century, by keeping the recorded date of the storming of the Bastille. Suppose it were discovered that the date had been recorded wrong, and that the Bastille fell a few days earlier or a few days later. Surely that would hardly make the Republican festival suddenly and entirely cease to be Republican. It would hardly make the storming of the Bastille the chosen topic of contemplation for Royalists and High Tories whose only hope was in reaction. It would hardly make the legend of the Revolution cease to be revolutionary.

I cannot see why a similar shifting of numerals should make the legend of Christmas cease to be Christian. For that matter, it would probably be easy to find examples of traditions that really did turn upon errors of detail. Many believe, for instance, that the political festival called Primrose Day is entirely founded on a mistake. Some say that Disraeli only said that he liked primroses in salads. Others say that Queen Victoria referred to the primrose as "his favourite flower," taking it for granted that "he" would always be held to refer to Prince Albert. In Mr. Laurence Housman's admirable dramatic interludes about Victorian statesmen, it is attributed to the gallantry of Disraeli, who says that any flower that the Queen sent him would become his favourite flower on the spot. But all these are agreed on the moral implied, which is that Disraeli had no such individual preference, and that possibly

"a primrose on the river's brim a yellow primrose was to him, and it was nothing more." But even if this were proved to be true, it would be preposterous to deduce from it that Primrose Day does not here represent Disraeli or that Disraeli does not here represent the Conservative Party. The change would not mean that every Radical instantly became a member of the Primrose League. It would not mean that every Bolshevik instantly appeared decorated all over with primroses. But these images are in no way more absurd than the image of Santa Claus ceasing to be a Christian saint quite suddenly, because some Higher Critic has told Mr. Arnold Bennett that Christ may not have been born on Dec. 25. The tradition of Trafalgar exists, whatever be its date; the French Revolution is a fact of gigantic range, whenever it began; even the Primrose League would be a fact in its way, although it were also a fiction. And considered in the coldest sense of secular history, Christmas is a fact, and could not possibly be dissociated from the two words that make it up.

But there is another fact, equally obvious from a secular and even sceptical standpoint. You cannot select a particular day without selecting a particular subject. You cannot have a day devoted to everything; it is contradicted by the very word devotion. You cannot have a festival dedicated to things in general; it is contradicted by the very idea of dedication. No religion, so far as I know, has ever had a Feast of the Universe; and Robespierre did not really get very far even with a Feast of the Supreme Being. It is too simple to be sensational; and a festival must be a sensation. A man will not be happy about all things, except in the sense in which he can be happy on all days. To produce the special psychological condition called rejoicing it is necessary to have something to rejoice over; something that can be hailed like a signal or received like a message. Hence, apart from anything else, any attempt to generalise a thing like Christmas is at war with a fact of human nature. To avoid the difficulty of dealing in a light controversial fashion with truths so tremendous as those really to be found in the heart of Christmas, I will assume, for the sake of argument, that some peasants somewhere have a very ancient tradition of keeping, let us say, the Feast of St. Francis. In one sense, to celebrate St. Francis is to celebrate all things and all people, for his charity went out to the most ragged robber and his sympathy to the smallest bird. Nevertheless, you can keep a symbolic ritual about St. Francis, as you cannot keep it about a vague medley of robbers and robins. And the reason is the fact in the heart of the fancies - a person and a real person. There was such a person as St. Francis; there is no such person as St. Friend.

This does, indeed, depend in its turn on a truth of human nature for which I have never been able to find a satisfactory definition, but upon it turns the form of all poetry and the ritual of all religions. We talk of the impossibility of seeing the wood for the trees, or of seeing the trees for the wood; but there is a much more mysterious truth in that dark wood of mysticism and mythology. The truth is that the nerve of

imagination is only touched when we can say, as would be said in a fairy-tale: "Within that wood there is one magic tree." So far as human imagination is concerned, it might almost be any tree, but it must be one. Different poets might say it of each tree in turn. But all the poets could only say it of one tree at a time. They must all be (in that sense) unable to see the wood, not only for the trees, but for a single tree. I would say that that one tree hid all the wood, were it not (by another paradox) a part of the very prominence of the tree that it is hidden in the wood. All this sounds very simple; but the more it is considered the more mysterious it will be found. I have never found any explanation that was entirely rationalistic and also entirely rational. I have only found one explanation of any kind. And that is that our souls do not come from everywhere, but from somewhere; that the method of our salvation was truly local and personal, and not cosmic and impersonal; that it is our fundamental spiritual nature to look for a particular place and a particular person; or, in other words, that the one tree in the wood is really a Christmas-tree.

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“THE RITUALS OF CHRISTMAS”

Chesterton, G. K.. For *The Illustrated London News*, 24 December 1927.

Christmas, with its Christmas candles and its hundred shapes and patterns of fire, from the old legend of the log to the blue flames of Snapdragon and the sacred oblation of burning brandy (in the true tradition of sacrifice, which is the destruction of the most precious thing for the glory of the divine powers) has rather irrationally thrown my thoughts back to the flames of a torchlight procession which I saw on the last great ceremonial festival in this city. It was a ritual rather new and national than old and religious. But it was one with which I have a special spiritual sympathy, and about which, at the time, I felt a certain sentiment and formed a certain opinion. I had a reason for not stating the opinion then; and I have a reason for stating the reason now.

I could not bring myself to criticise the Armistice celebrations immediately after Armistice Day; because it was just possible that any criticism, which was really critical, might be mistaken for a surrender to that most morbid and unmanly mood of reaction which I have noticed only too often throwing cold water upon those torches which those heroes will carry through history. I would rather join in any mummery, or tolerate any mistakes, than be for one moment mistaken for one of those "modern" persons who have gradually and cautiously, after the peril was over, plucked up courage to preach a religion of cowardice. We have had even poetry prostituted to the service of poltroonery. We have had lyrics loud with panic, of which the best we can say is that their healthiest excuse is shell-shock, but that it is a

little difficult to remain charitable when the shocked claims popularity as the shocker. Mean little studies of neurotic paralysis have been put forward as the only realistic record of the one great proof that humanity has given to the heavens of the huge human equality in normal virility and velour. When to this dishonouring of the dead was added the vile indifference and injustice to the living, which has left thousands of the saviours of the world as drifting and desperate as so many old lags out of jail, the reaction to what many would call reason and "normalcy" is not one with which I desire to be connected or confused. And to express anything savouring of disappointment or doubt about the Armistice ceremonies might well have seemed like contributing to that contemptible coldness or striking the same note as did that dreary *diminuendo*. But now, as I say, when we shall soon be in a position to compare such ceremonial with the ancient ceremonials founded by our fathers, in the days when men had an instinct for such things, I think it worth while to remark on some of the memories, and even some of the mistakes, in the more modern formality in its more modern framework. If we are to have ceremonial, Armistice Day has a great deal to learn from Christmas Day, and especially from the days when the Christmas ritual was created.

All ceremony depends on symbol; and all symbols have been vulgarised and made stale by the commercial conditions of our time. This has been especially true since we have felt the commercial infection of America, and progress has turned London, not into a superior London, but into a very inferior New York. Of all these faded and falsified symbols, the most melancholy example is the ancient symbol of the flame. In every civilised age and country, it has been a natural thing to talk of some great festival on which "the town was illuminated." There is no meaning nowadays in saying that the town was illuminated. There is no point or purpose in having it illuminated for any normal and noble enthusiasm, such as the winning of a victory or the granting of a charter. The whole town is illuminated already, but not for noble things. It is illuminated solely to insist on the immense importance of trivial and material things, blazoned from motives entirely mercenary. The significance of such colours and such lights has therefore been entirely killed. It is no good to send up a golden and purple rocket for the glory of the King and Country, or to light a red and raging bonfire on the day of St. George, when everybody is used to seeing the same fiery alphabet proclaiming the importance of Tibble's Tooth Paste or Giggle's Chewing Gum. The new illumination has not, indeed, made Tibble and Giggle so important as St. George and King George; because nothing could. But it has made people weary of the way of proclaiming great things, by perpetually using it to proclaim small things. It has not destroyed the difference between light and darkness, but it has allowed the lesser light to put out the greater.

I was standing in the very heart of this holy town, opposite the Abbey, and within a stone's-throw of the Thames, when I saw the torchlight procession turn the corner and take the road towards the Cenotaph. Now, a torchlight procession is one of the most magnificent of all those instinctive and imaginative institutions by which men have sought to express deep democratic passions of praise or triumph, or lamentation, since the morning of the world. Naturally, by all artistic instinct, they were held at night; and they were held in times and places which were lucky enough to retain a little night. They cannot be done in a garish and feverish civilization which insists on turning night into day. In those older and simple societies, republics, or kingdoms, there would probably have been enough sense of public authority to command a Curfew, and force all citizens to put out all lights while the pageant of the sacred flames went by. But the modern mind is in an unfathomable muddle about all these things. Our streets are in a permanent dazzle, and our minds in a permanent darkness. It would be an intelligible process to abolish all ceremonies, as the Puritans did. But it is not intelligible to keep ceremonies and spoil them; and nothing in the literature of lunacy is weaker and wilder than the appearance of this wavering sort of lunatic, holding a lighted candle at noon.

A short time ago, the very section of the city in which I was standing was abruptly blotted out by total darkness, the electric light having gone wrong. I wish it had gone wrong at the moment when the marching men turned the corner with all their torches burning. One catastrophe of that sort would have saved the whole situation, and perhaps the whole memory and meaning of the Great War. Its glory would have got a good black background at last; and that moving conflagration would have burned red in men's memories until they died. That was the ceremony as our fathers planned it; and that is also how the ceremonies of Christmas were planned. If we are wise, we shall keep these latter also in the ancient manner, and according to plan. If we must be merely American in our business, let us at least be civilised in our pleasures. Let us understand, as the artists and the ancient priests and heralds have always understood, the meaning of contrast and the conception of a background. If Snapdragon burns with blue flames, do not let us kill it with a white light, with that enterprising spot-light which is so very decidedly a death-ray. If we have the common-sense to see that red firelight looks redder in the twilight, let us have the courage to refuse the kind American gentleman's offer of an electric light ten times stronger than day-light. Let us show that the ancient culture, which has produced a picture or two in its time, still knows something about how real pictures are made; even if they are only picture postcards to be used as Christmas cards.

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“CHRISTMAS MUST GO”

Chesterton, G. K.. For *G.K.'s Weekly*, 07 December 1933.

Christmas is utterly unsuited to the modern world. It presupposes the possibility of families being united, or reunited, and even of the men and women who chose each other being on speaking terms. Thus thousands of young adventurous spirits, ready to face the facts of human life, and encounter the vast variety of men and women as they really are, ready to fly to the ends of the earth and tolerate every alien or accidental quality in cannibals or devil worshippers, are cruelly forced to face an hour, nay sometimes even two hours, in the society of Uncle George; or some aunt from Cheltenham whom they do not particularly like. Such abominable tortures cannot be tolerated in a time like ours. That larger brotherhood, that truer sensibility, has already taught every spirited young lady (of sufficient wealth and leisure) to be thrilled at the prospect of having breakfast with a gun-man, lunch with a Sheik, and dinner with an Apache in Paris. It is intolerable that such sensibility should suffer the shock of the unexpected appearance of her own mother, or possibly her own child. It was never supposed that Parents were included in the great democratic abstraction called People. It was never supposed that brotherhood could extend to brothers.

Anyhow, Christmas is unsuited to modern life; its concentration in the household was conceived without allowing for the size and convenience of the modern hotel; its inheritance of ceremonial ignored the present convention of unconventionality; its appeal to childhood was in conflict with the more liberal conception; that Bright Young Things should always feel as if they were old and talk as if they were dull. That freer and franker school of manners, which consists of being bored with everybody who is present and forgetting everybody who is absent, is insulted in its first part by the old custom of drinking healths or exchanging good wishes, and in its second part by the custom of writing letters or sending Christmas cards. Under the load of such old tribal or communal exchanges, it is impossible to preserve the fine shade, the delicate distinction that marks modern manners; the distinction by which the next-door neighbour in the street is forgotten, while the next, door neighbour at the dinner-table is only ignored. How could we expect to extend a tradition that depended upon hospitality, across that happy interlude in the modern fashionable world, which replaced hospitality by housebreaking? Some variation of phrase was doubtless essential; and, to speak strictly and pedantically, it was called gate-crashing when done by the upper classes and housebreaking when done by the lower classes. But the burglar drinking whisky of which he had not been invited to partake, and the Bright Young Thing drinking champagne of which she had not been invited to partake, unconsciously joined hands in one great forward

and progressive urge, to sweep away the old superstition of hospitality. Hospitality has a hundred horrid implications anyhow; it implies that my home belongs to me more than it belongs to an interviewer from a syndicated millionaire newspaper in Detroit; and however heartily and affectionately I may entertain and embrace such an interviewer, there is still a queer atmospheric prejudice hovering in his mind, not to mention mine; the old uncanny and creepy superstition that he is in somebody else's house. He would undoubtedly be freed from this embarrassment if we met in a large hotel, or a larger and even more impersonal tea-shop, or in a public library, or in a post office, or in the draughty corridors of a tube station. The very names of these places will suggest that richer warmth, that fuller fraternity, that tingling humanity in all human contacts, which comes to men the moment they have abandoned private property.

Anyhow, it is unnecessary to extend the list of evidences that Christmas does not fit in with this fuller and more liberated life. Christmas must go. Christmas is utterly unsuited to the great future that is now opening before us. Christmas is not founded on the great communal conception which can only find its final expression in Communism. Christmas does not really help the higher and healthier and more vigorous expansion of Capitalism. Christmas cannot be expected to fit in with modern hopes of a great social future. Christmas is a contradiction of modern thought. Christmas is an obstacle to modern progress. Rooted in the past, and even the remote past, it cannot assist a world in which the ignorance of history is the only clear evidence of the knowledge of science. Born among miracles reported from two thousand years ago, it cannot expect to impress that sturdy common sense which can withstand the plainest and most palpable evidence for miracles happening at this moment. Dealing with matters purely psychic, it naturally has no interest for psychologists; having been the moral atmosphere of millions for more than sixteen centuries, it is of no interest to an age concerned with averages and statistics. It is concerned with the happiest of births and is the chief enemy of Eugenics; it carries along with it a tradition of voluntary virginity, yet it contains no really practical hints for compulsory sterilisation. At every point it is found to be in opposition to that great onward movement, by which we know that ethics will evolve into something that is more ethical and free from all ethical distinctions. Christmas is not modern; Christmas is not Marxian; Christmas is not made on the pattern of that great age of the Machine, which promises to the masses an epoch of even greater happiness and prosperity than that to which it has brought the masses at this moment. Christmas is medieval; having arisen in the earlier days of the Roman Empire. Christmas is a superstition. Christmas is a survival of the past.

But why go on piling up the praises of Christmas? All its gifts and glories are externally symbolised in that fact already sufficiently summarised; that it is a

nuisance to all the people talking the particular nonsense of our own time. It is an irritation to all men who have lost their instincts; which is very truly the intellectual equivalent of losing their senses. It is a perpetual annoyance to the cads who are not only captains of industry, but captains of information and international news, and everything else in the present paradise of cads. It is a challenge to caddishness, because it reminds us of a more gracious world of courtesy; and of customs which assumed a sort of dignity in human relations. It is a puzzle to pedants whose cold hatred involves them in a continual contradiction; who are distracted between denouncing Christmas because it is a Mass, or purely Popish mummery, and trying to prove at the same time that it is entirely heathen, and was once as admirable as everything else invented by the pirates of heathen Scandinavia. It stands up unbroken and baffling; for us one thing, for them a confusion of inconsistencies; and it judges the modern world. Christmas must go. It is going. In fact it is going strong.

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“CHRISTMAS AND THE DISTRIBUTIST”

Chesterton, G. K.. For *G.K.'s Weekly*, 13 December 1934.

We have all been told, many thousand times, that Christmas is really a Pagan festival. It is commonly asserted by a certain social type we all know in these times, one torn asunder by two timidities; one who dares not really practise Paganism and dares not really study Christianity. On the other hand, it gives him a secret glow to feel that he can practise Paganism merely by keeping Christmas; that when he takes a sip of claret-cup, he is drinking deep of the mead of the Vikings at their wild Winter Feast; that when he nails up mistletoe in his respectable villa, he is dancing round the sacred oak with strange and savage Druids reeking with human sacrifices; or that should he kiss somebody under that vegetable, he is for all practical purposes scarlet with the sins of Tiberius and Messalina. On the other hand, it saves him from the particular type of toil and trouble which is most repugnant to the refined modern intellect. For instance, it excuses him from using his human reason; and asking himself whether it is likely, in any case, that so huge a human and historic institution as the Church would not anyhow have celebrated the birth of its divinity and hero, even if there had never been any heroes or divinities before. It excuses him from any common familiarity with the past of his own culture; as, for example, it excuses him from discovering how all the old Carols, from the Dark Ages downwards, have been soaked in a purely Christian spirit of holy poverty and the overwhelming conception of the humility of God. In short, it excuses him from learning anything that he does not know already; from studying anything that is not served to him with bacon and eggs in the morning paper; from trying to understand anything that he happens to dislike, or being fair to anything towards which fairness is not the fashion.

Anyhow, he finds this satisfaction and this escape in saying that Christmas was really a Pagan feast. He might just as well say that Crusades were really a Pagan movement; because the old heathen Romans also rode horses and wore helmets, and went eastwards with shields and spears to fight in the deserts with Parthians or Egyptians. Any European military expeditions, against any of the nearest Oriental lands or races, will resemble each other in some respects; and any European festivals, held in the depth of the northern or western winter, will resemble each other in some respects. But to say that the main motive which created Christmas was a desire to continue the habits of Vikings is just about as historical as to say that establishing the religion of Odin and Thor was the main motive of Crusaders. It merely means that our particular corner of Christendom can now be taught the history of every civilisation except its own. Or, to vary the parallel, it is as if somebody said (to people who had never seen them) that the Gothic cathedrals were exactly modelled on the Pagan temples; because they had altars and other things necessary to any temples. We may confine ourselves to saying that he would entirely miss the point; and it is the whole point of Gothic that it does come to a point. Any artist, any normal appreciator of art, would see that every line of the Christian thing expressed a different idea and feeling from the heathen, even if he equally disbelieved in both. But in the case of Christmas, the identification can be safely made to a generation of newspaper-readers, who really know as little about Christianity as about Paganism. There is a particular aspect of this truth, however, with which I must concern myself here. I undertook last week to conclude certain rambling reflections on certain philosophical ideas which lie behind the distributive idea; and it so happens that these ideas are rather specially qualified to fit in with a note upon the Christmas feast. I remarked that long before I came to accept any spiritual system, I had some of the fragments of such a system floating in my own imagination, floating very vaguely, but all floating in a certain direction. I could not define them, but even then I might have described them, as something of which Christmas is the best traditional symbol. It was then no more than a notion about that point at which extremes meet, and the most common thing becomes a cosmic and mystical thing. I did not want so much to alter the place and use of things as to weight them with a new dimension; to deepen them by going down to the potential nothing; to lift them to infinity by measuring from zero. The most logical form of this is in thanks to a Creator; but at every stage I felt that such praises could never rise too high; because they could not even reach the height of our own thanks for unthinkable existence, or horror of more unthinkable non-existence. And the commonest things, as much as the most complex, could thus leap up like fountains of praise.

I have remarked how early I found progressive movements, sympathetic to me in some ways, running athwart this feeling; especially the Feminist contempt for

common housework. I thought George Herbert wrote a much better essay on a broomstick than Jonathan Swift. But the new fashion held that it was degrading to use a broom; more dignified to sell a broom; and quite high and heroic to sell twelve thousand brooms, all exactly alike, because a big machine must be kept busy and could only turn out that pattern. I felt in my blood and bones that all this was as wrong as could be. I wanted more respect for the lady with the broom and not less; I was willing to treat the broom as a sceptre, but not merely as a makeshift for a vacuum-cleaner. Nature abhors that sort of vacuum; and all that new culture was very clean and very vacuous. There was nothing in it to make common life interesting; that could only be done by making common things interesting. And that can be done by imagination but not by invention; by festivals, traditions, images, legends, patron-saints or household-gods; but not by gadgets.

We shall need a sort of Distributist psychology, as well as a Distributist philosophy. That is partly why I am not content with plausible solutions about credit or corporative rule. We need a new (or old) theory and practice of pleasure. The vulgar school of panem et circenses only gives people circuses; it does not even tell them how to enjoy circuses. But we have not merely to tell them how to enjoy circuses. We have to tell them how to enjoy enjoyment. When they have learnt that, they will enjoy any Christmas game much more than any circus Nero can provide. It is the ultimate unspeakable madness and delusion of Nero, that he believes he has the best of everything. That is exactly what he does not have; for it is only reached by real imagination- and patience. The plutocrat does not have the best of everything. Poor miserable brute, he has to put up with only having everything.

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“CHRISTMAS AND SPORT”

Chesterton, G. K.. For *The Coventry Herald*, 21 December 1934.

The difference between Christmas and most modern games or sports is essentially this: Christmas is frivolous on top and serious underneath; while sport is serious on top and frivolous underneath. The first is like finding froth on the top of a strong ale; the second is like finding unliberated gases bubbling at the bottom of a much heavier drink.

The old games of Christmas were all conceived with the idea of men making fools of themselves; but this alone involves a rather solemn preliminary problem; about whether they are fools already. But the idea was that of the Saturnalia, or dignity becoming undignified; and that is exactly the difference between Saturnalia and Satanism.

Solid and solemn city men, let us say, were required to take part in the game of "Honey pots," which involves sitting on the floor, hunched up in a squatting attitude at the risk of being rolled over, as if the fairies had indeed turned them into pots of honey, instead of leaving them with the dismal distinction of having pots of money.

Some great millionaire equipped with the brain of steel and the will of iron which are part of the apparatus of his profession, might nonetheless be required to play one of the old nursery games. He might be condemned to play Puss-in-the-Corner instead of playing Plutocrat-in-the-Corner; in whatever wheat corner or milk corner he might be at the moment benefiting mankind.

The whole idea of these old childish games was to make everybody look childish; and the results were not only great fun, but really funny. But if you had the antiquarian curiosity to ask why there was this tradition of people becoming childish, you would trace it back to a tremendous, a mysterious, and even a paradoxical doctrine, that on this strange night even God became a child

Now if we look at the games now generally substituted for the games of Christmas, we shall find the exact contrary. We shall find that the basis is entirely trivial; but that the tower of solemnity erected on that trifle is as enormous as the Tower of Babel.

I would not make any antithesis between golf and God; lest some of the most serious Scotsmen should be tempted to deny their creator. But, if I may take the game of golf as typical, I think it is a fairly illuminating type. The actual aim and origin of golf is to put a very small pellet in a very small pocket. There was nothing large or elemental or imaginative about the materials of the thing; it is not throwing a great rock into a great abyss. It possesses about the correctitude of putting a pill back into a pill box, and rather less than the excitement of blowing a pea out of a pea-shooter.

That, I mean, is what it is in itself. But when we come to consider what has been made of it, we are faced with an array of awful and almost appalling intellectual responsibilities, which make me shudder even as I touch on the topic.

The natural destiny of a game is to be enjoyed and to be forgotten. It is horribly certain that modern games are not forgotten, and it is allowable to doubt whether they are in this sense enjoyed.

An enormous superstructure of work and worry and specialism and expenditure has been reared above these grown-up games; though their substantial subject-matter is every bit as slight and trivial as that of the childish games. I wonder

whether the time will come when a man has to pay about ten guineas to join the Puss-in-the-Corner club; or has to purchase a huge apparatus in order to Hunt-the-Slipper; or must wait till he is a very wealthy man of about 50 or 60 before he can play Hide-and-Seek.

Christmas taught people to feast on a feast day, and to be as funny as possible while the fun was going; and it did this because there was a real reason for doing it. But our modern fun has grown more solemn than solemnity itself a semicolon because there is no reason for it at all.

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“CHRISTMAS AND THE FIRST GAMES”

Chesterton, G. K.. For *G.K.'s Weekly*, 20 December 1934.

I have sometimes been haunted with a vague story about a wild and fantastic uncle, the enemy of parents and the cause of revolution in nurseries, who went about preaching a certain theory; I menu the theory that all the objects which children use at Christmas for what we call riotous or illegitimate purposes, were originally created for those purposes; and not for the humdrum household purposes which they now serve. For instance, we will suppose that the story begins with a pillow-fight in a night-nursery; and boys buffeting and bashing each other with those white and shapeless clubs. The uncle, who would be a professor of immense learning and even greater imagination and inventiveness, would proceed to make himself unpopular with parents and popular with children, by proving that the pillow in prehistoric art is obviously designed to be a club; that the sham-fight in the night-nursery is actually more ancient and authoritative than the whole institution of beds or bedclothes; that in some innocent morning of the world such cherubim warred on each other with such clouds, possibly made of white samite, mystic, wonderful, and stuffed with feathers from the angels' wings; and that it was only afterwards, when weariness fell upon the world and the young gods had grown feed of their godlike sports, that they slept with their heads upon their weapons; and so, by a gradual dislocation of the whole original purpose of the pillow, it came to be recognised as having its proper place on a bed. It is obvious that any number of these legends could be launched with ease and grace and general gratification. It would be urged, to eagerly assenting little boys, that catapults are really older and more majestic than windows. Windows were merely targets set up for catapults, clear and fragile that such archaic archers might be rewarded with a crash and sparkle of crystal; that it was only after the oppressive priesthood of the Middle Paleolithic had ruthlessly suppressed the Catapult Culture, that people had gradually come to use the now useless glass targets for purposes of light or ventilation. Similarly, butter was originally used solely to make butter-slides

in the path of parents and guardians; and it was only by a late accident in the life of some prominent though prostrate citizen, who happened to lick the pavement, that its edible qualities were discovered, like the edible qualities of roast pork in Charles Lamb's story. The subversive principle can be applied to almost every childish game; it may be said that primitive hunters hunted the slipper, long before that leaping and elusive animal was duplicated and worn as furry spoils upon the feet of the hunter. It might be said that no handkerchief was ever used to blow the nose, as in our degenerate day, till it had been used for centuries to blind the eyes, as in the hierarchic mystery of Blind-Man's-Buff.

True, I cannot set forth here in any great detail any actual proofs of these prehistoric origins; but I never heard of anybody bothering about historic proofs in connection with prehistoric origins. There is quite as much evidence for my favourite uncle's theory of the primitive pillow as there is for Mr. H. G. Wells's detailed account of the horrible Old Man, who ruled by terror over twenty or thirty younger men who could have thrown him out of the cave on his ape-like ear; there is as much scientific proof as there is for Dr. Freud's highly modern and morbid romance about a whole race of sexual perverts making a whole religious service out of parricide; there is as much in the way of data for demonstration as in Mr. Gerald Heard's sentimental film-scenario about arboreal anthropoids kissing the stones which they throw at lions. Nobody expects any historic evidence for things of this sort, because they are prehistoric; and nobody dreams of attempting to found them on any scientific facts; they are simply Science. I do not see why my favourite uncle and I should not be Science too. I do not see why we should not simply make things up out of our own heads; things which cannot possibly be contradicted, just as they cannot possibly be proved. The only difference is that my uncle and I, especially when we set out with a general intention of talking about Christmas, cannot manage to work up that curious loathing of the human race, which is now considered essential to any history written for humanitarians. Dr. Freud (as is perhaps natural after a heavy day of psychopathic interviews) seems to have taken quite a dislike to human beings. So when he makes up the story, of how their first forgotten institutions arose in utterly unrecorded times, he makes the family story as nasty as he can; like any other modern novelist. But my uncle and I (especially at Christmas) happen to feel in a more cheerful and charitable frame of mind; and, as there are no iron creeds or dogmas to restrain anybody from anything, we have as much right to imagine cheerful things as he has to imagine gloomy ones. And we beg to announce, with the same authority, that everything began with a celestial pillow-fight of cherubs, or that the whole world was made entirely for the games of children.

The application of the argument, however, especially to this Christmas and this crisis of human history, is somewhat more practical. Even if we had to descend

to that lower level of historical evidence, to which the soaring scientist never has to descend, we might find some truths involved in It which are of some value just now. And without taking my uncle's optimist fairytales quite so seriously as the pessimist fairytales are taken, I should like to touch on two or three points in which they illustrate very relevant realities about Christmas; and especially about Christmas in the present economic conditions of the earth. Christmas is neither optimist nor pessimist; perhaps it is a sane but subtle blend of the truths of both. For Christmas is a winter feast; and nine times out of ten an optimist is a fool who denies that there is any winter; and a pessimist is a fool who denies that it is possible to feast.

The two or three truths, of which my uncle's hypothesis is at least symbolic or suggestive, may be conveniently arranged thus. First, it must always be remembered that there really is a mystery, and something resembling a religious mystery, in the origin of many things which have since become (very rightly) practical and (very wrongly) prosaic. If my uncle in a festive moment declared that fireworks came before fires; and were used to blazon the blackness of night with ceremonial illuminations, before it was even noticed that they could cook our food or warm our hands, he might not be speaking with pedantic precision; but he would not be far off from a considerable historical truth. There are many strange traces of the ritual side of tilling or tending animals preceding the practical side. Second, it must be remembered that these rituals, including Christmas, have been on the whole preserved most continuously by the populace; for a true populace is far more traditional than an aristocracy. They have been preserved by poor people, though generally by poor people who possessed some small property; in short, most markedly by a peasantry. Thus if my uncle, rising hilariously once more, were to propound to the company the opinion that the Christmas stocking stuffed with gifts and strung onto the bedpost, was a thing far more ancient and authoritative than mere common human stockings as degraded to be the livery of common human legs, I should soothe him by assuring him that I saw his point, though I might not accept this literal illustration of it.

Now it is very interesting to remember that there is another proverb, or traditional truth, about stockings in connection with peasants. It has often been said that the peasant put his small property into his stocking, stuck his little hoard of gold into his stocking, so that it might be safe from thieves and bankers. And the peasant was lectured to about this, by no less nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine lecturers on political economy and professional professors of economics or high finance. It was patiently pointed out to him that metal coins do not breed like maggots when left in a stocking; that guineas do not have little families of guineas as guinea-pigs do of guinea-pigs; that a stocking is not a nest in which a sovereign can lay half-sovereigns as a bird lays eggs; or, in more learned but less sensible language,

that his money was nor bringing him in any interest. So that the only way to make money do what money cannot do, and the only true scientific scheme for proving there is a guinea-and-a-half when there is only a guinea, is to put it in a bank. A bank, as the nine thousand professors of economies explained to the stupid or stupefied peasant, can never fail to pay interest. A stocking may wear out or have holes in it; thieves may break in and steal; but it is manifestly impossible for bankers to steal; and even a violation of nature's laws for things in banks to be stolen; much more for them to disappear altogether, in so brisk and busy a centre of speculation. Since banks cannot conceivably fail, argued the professors, you would obviously be a richer man, with somebody else's money from somewhere somehow mysteriously added to your own, if you would take it out of the stocking and put it into the bank. The peasant was still dazed; but he was strangely stubborn. Since then, the situation has been modified in various ways; and a good many of the professors are wishing they had imitated the peasant.

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“CHRISTMAS CONTINUED”

Chesterton, G. K.. For *G.K.'s Weekly*, 27 December 1934.

I ended last week with the double significance of the Christmas Stocking and its relation to the peasant culture; and I would here conclude my remarks: for the Christmas of Christians is not over until Twelfth Night. Now the stocking seems to be a paradoxical symbol; for the stocking stuffed with gold is made a sign of hoarding; and the stocking stuffed with gifts a sign of giving. But the truth, that both the two traditions come down to us through the same traditional types of people, is proved by the mere fact that both take refuge in the same common receptacle. The prudence of the peasant on ordinary days, and the festivity of the peasant on feast days, have lingered on in a more complex community as reminders of certain permanent human things that do not really change; or only change in a frothy and frivolous surface of society, which does nothing else except change. The common people have never been entirely out of touch with these two ideas; the idea that there should be relaxation, hospitality and conviviality on certain particular dates and days; and the idea that these ritual rejoicings can almost always be fitted out from the existing articles in domestic use; with stockings to be filled, or slippers to be hunted; or fire to be used almost as emblematically as fireworks.

Through various causes, fortunate and unfortunate, there is now a very wide and general opportunity of a return to simplicity. At first it may only have seemed to be a return, through ruin, to the simplicity of poverty. There is very good reason to hope that it may yet be a return, through reconstruction, to the simplicity of justice.

But in either case these simple and fundamental ideas, which have never really been destroyed in the democracy, will probably play a very practical part. For the moral sentiments of the mass of men have never really been altered very much, about such things as private life and private property and private celebrations. The extremes of socialism or super-capitalism or mere materialistic theory have only affected the men who imposed these things; not very much the men on whom they were imposed. The mob has been muddled; it has been misled; it has been blankly bewildered; but, thank heaven, it has never been educated or instructed. The trouble has come because large societies have been ruled by small sects. But, in every sort of vague fashion, the large societies have remained large-hearted societies. And none has been, on the whole, more large-hearted than those whom we call the small men. But they have been paralysed by all sorts of economic and ethical pedantries, which forbade them to carry their warmth beyond their own firesides. Communists in the twentieth century are as narrow as Calvinists in the seventeenth century; it is notable that both sects forbade Christmas.

In short, Christmas itself has not changed very much; but in the world where there is change, there is much more to be hoped for in the Christmas of the Slump than in the Christmas of the Boom. An ancient form of our civilisation has naturally passed through many phases, both of peril and revival; but it was never in such peril when it was being persecuted by the Puritans as when it was being revived by the salesmen. Everybody knows the parable of Dickens, about the grasping and greedy man of business who would not give a penny to Christian charities, but was converted by seeing three different ghosts of Father Christmas. But I fear that Mr. Scrooge was much more dangerous to Christian civilisation, after he was converted to Christmas than before. Better that he should curse Christmas and leave it alone, for the little Cratchits to enjoy, than that he should be the Founder of the Feast by selling turkeys to the Cratchits at a big price, and so grow richer and richer, until everybody was thinking about the price and nobody about the turkey. Better be merely an old man grumbling at an older institution, than an old humbug advertising Christmas as the very latest novelty. It is bad enough that some of the vulgarisers of religion do sometimes seem to be persuading men that they really need a Redeemer, as a salesman persuades them that they really need a vacuum-cleaner. It is even worse that the ancient human need of the winter feast, Pagan as well as Christian, should figure on the advertisement pages as one of the new artificial needs; as one of those great unnecessary necessities. This might well do more harm to the deeper human truth than the negative oppression of the Puritan or the Utilitarian. The real institution, hitherto so unchanged in the charitable instincts of normal individuals and families, might share and suffer from the general reaction against overproduction and reckless commercial adventure. Nevertheless, I think the thing is far too deeply

rooted to be in any such mortal danger; and anything like a return to more simplified and straightforward economic life will be overwhelmingly in favour of its resurrection.

It is by no means unlikely that much larger sections of humanity will be the happier for falling back on more fundamental forms of life and production; and (without entirely surrendering my private judgment to my celebrated uncle and his far-famed heresy) it is out of such social fundamentals, and perhaps even anterior to them, that religious rites like Christmas arose. It is not impossible that many of our sons and grandsons may live to have a real Yule-Log, which they will themselves saw off a tree; instead of Ye Olde Christmase Yule-Logge ordered from the Stores. It is not unlikely that the child may again have the gratification of recognising his own parent, by piercing a disguise hastily constructed from Uncle William's red dressing-gown, Aunt Maria's white furs, carpet-slippers, and cotton-wool used to pack the medicine bottles; instead of staring with increasing weariness at six weary but stolid and identical Father Christmasses; total strangers and probably discontented proletarians; hired for God knows what in six vulgar shops. It is even possible that Christmas might awaken the creative side of cookery, which exists so actively in all the peasant countries where they dedicate particular dishes to particular days. Grown-up people might find it almost as much fun to make mince-pies as children find it to make mud-pies; for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven. But anyhow, it seems possible that they may learn to make something: and conceivably even like to make something. That is the sharpest and shrewdest and most refreshing cure for a culture that has fallen into the routine of buying and selling everything. It is not irrelevant to remember that the more mystical side of Christmas is turned towards a sacred origin that is full of such memories, both of the dignity and the oppression of the poor; and that the presence which presides over it was concerned with direct craftsmanship, such as still exists in simpler countries, in solid materials and with domestic tools. What is called in America the New Deal is really a great repentance and revulsion from the very many raw deals which such men have been meeting in the entangled economics of every modern country; and Christmas and all its story goes back to the red cloud of such a burning shame in the great original Raw Deal, when one obscure family found itself shut out of the high inhuman hostelry, and was forced to lie down among the beasts.

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“ON KEEPING CHRISTMAS”

Chesterton, G. K.. For *The Illustrated London News*, 21 December 1935.

Christmas, which the calendar assures me is coming, has been the crux of more controversies than most people remember when they take advantage of the fortunate fact that it has so often been saved from its enemies. But, like any other good thing, it has suffered much less from the heat of fanatical foes than from the coldness of frigid friends. Fanaticism only encouraged the devout to be defiant, and they resolutely repeated it as a ritual; it was much more in peril of death where people only repeated it as a routine. Now, a ritual is almost the opposite of a routine. It is because the modern world has missed that point that the modern world has in every other way fallen more and more into routine. The essence of real ritual is that a man does something because it signifies something; it may be stiff or slow or ceremonial in form; that depends on the nature of the artistic form that is used. But he does it because it is significant. It is the essence of routine that he does it because it is insignificant. It is the whole point of the ritualist that he knows what he is doing. It is the whole point of the routine worker that he does not know what he is doing. It may be an advantage that he should perform such dull tasks in such a detached way; it may be argued that it is better for the work or for the world that it have routine that is only routine. It may be better, for those who like it, that a man should work in this unconscious fashion; it may be better that he should be an animal; it may be better that he should be an automaton. But it is not the same thing as the man expressing some idea by performing certain acts, even if we think they are antics. It is not the same thing as a man practicing the sacred and solemn art and craft of a mummer, even if we dislike all such mummery. The principle of ancient ritual is to do certain useless things because they mean something. The principle of modern routine is to do certain useful things, but to free ourselves from that degrading slavery by doing them as if they meant nothing.

The forms of Christian festivity are often said to have begun in the old pagan world, and heaven knows they have survived into a new pagan world. But anybody, whether he is a new pagan or an old pagan or even conceivably (for you never know your luck) a Christian, is in fact observing this sort of significant mummery in observing any form of Christmas celebration at all. The professor of ethnological ethics may attribute the tradition of the mistletoe to Baldur or to the Druids. But he must recognise that certain ceremonies were performed under the mistletoe, even if ethnological ethics have permitted other professors to perform them in many places elsewhere. The musical critic, or student of the stages of harmonic development, may distinguish between the quality of a good ancient carol or a bad modern one. But he knows that, even in this timeless time, it is only somewhere about the beginning of

Advent that little boys in the street begin to sing the carols attached to Christmas. Like all little boys, they are in advance of the age; but at least they do not begin to sing Christmas carols on Midsummer Day. In short, wherever anybody observes Christmas forms at all, they are still to some extent limited by the idea of a Christmas ritual, and the recurrence of times and seasons. The thing is done at a particular time so that people may be conscious of a particular truth; as is the case with all ceremonial observances, such as the Silence on Armistice Day or the signal of a salute with the guns or the sudden noise of bells for the New Year. They are all meant to fix the mind upon the fact of the feast or memorial, and suggest that a passing moment has a meaning when it would otherwise be meaningless. Behind the opposite notion of emancipation there is really the notion that we should be more normal if all moments were meaningless. The old way of liberating human life was to lift it into more intense consciousness; the new way of liberating it is to let it lapse into a sort of absence of mind. That is what is meant by saying, as many journalists actually do say, that a civilisation of robots would be more efficient and peaceful. One of the advantages of a robot is the complete absence of his mind.

Thus I will admit anything against old customs, except the idea that they are dead and meaningless. It is the society without customs that becomes dead and meaningless. If the professor says to me frankly: "I do not want to kiss a girl under the mistletoe because it makes me think what I am doing, whereas I can now kiss any number of other girls anywhere without thinking what I am doing," then I think he is an honest fellow, and I can debate with him about the real facts of ethnological ethics. If the little boy in the street says: "I like bawling at any time of the year, and I don't see why I shouldn't bawl all the year round," then I am quite ready to admit that it is the nature of boys to bawl, and that there is a certain sympathy between us, because I have been a boy myself. But if either of them say that there is less significance in ritual salutes or ritual songs than in the hearty human instinct to kiss anybody or bawl anything, then I disagree with them upon a purely intellectual issue. It seems to me that human life tends of itself to become much too monotonous and mechanical; and that this is just as true of lax social habits as of stricter ones. If the object is to make life more intense and intelligent, to increase imagination, which is a sense of the meaning of things, then I think it can be done much better by keeping dates and seasons and symbolic actions, than by letting everybody and everything drift.

The modern world has, in the literal sense of the word, made everybody much too insignificant. It has, in the old Greek sense of the word, made every man far too much of an idiot. For insignificance only means lack of significance; and idiot in the old Greek sense only meant a man without any public or philosophic or religious significance. I might, to my deep and desolating grief, cause offence if I said that the

commercial and industrial world is now conducted by a vast army of idiots. But Plato would have understood what I mean; and many are more and more understanding it, especially those who substitute the more respectful description of an army of ants. What is called the Termite State has followed on what was understood, or rather not understood, by the Servile State. It is only too likely, on the face of it, that the ant-hill will rise higher than the mere mountains like Sinai or Olympus or Calvary; that mankind will be directed to a monstrous uniformity in which the individual ideals of the past will be lost; and that the quarrels of the sects will yield to the complete comradeship of the insects. But any man who keeps Christmas in his own home is resisting the tragic transformation of the home into the hive.

For reasons that it would be indelicate to mention here, I do not believe that Christmas will perish; or that the human beings who are all reborn in Bethlehem will ever actually become ants and bees. They can only for a century or two try the experiment of being bad bees and extremely inefficient ants. For no bee ever did try to swarm alone; none (if I may be so flippant) ever put to himself the morbid human problem of "to bee or not to bee"; and though the sluggard may perhaps learn from the ant, there never was an ant who attempted to learn anything from the dreams and reveries of the sluggard. The Servile State might exist, for the Servile State has existed. But the Termite State will never really exist, but only some horrible parody of human beings pretending to be inhuman. But if individuals ever became like insects, or if insects ever became like individuals, there is one way in which the latter would proclaim their liberation; and that is by the proclamation of fixed festivals and forms. If bees ever do buzz carols in honour of a dead bee, or ants set up a sacred image of a divine ant on the top of the ant-hill, then we shall know that the isolation of man is invaded, and his unique work in the universe has a parallel. But in the cheery reunion of Christmas I ask as many professors as I know, and none of them seems to think it is probable

“CHRISTMAS GAMES: SNAPDRAGON”

From entry for “December 24” from Chambers’ *Book of Days*.

Some interesting particulars relative to the indoor diversions of our ancestors at Christmas, occur in the following passage quoted by Brand from a tract, entitled Round about our Coal-fire, or Christmas Entertainments, which was published in the early part of the last century.' The time of the year being cold and frosty, the diversions are within doors, either in exercise or by the fireside. Dancing is one of the chief exercises; or else there is a match at Blindman's Buff, or Puss in the Corner. The next game is Questions and Commands, when the commander may oblige his subjects to answer any lawful question, and make the same obey him instantly, under the penalty of being smutted [having the face blackened], or paying such forfeit as may be laid on the aggressor. Most of the other diversions are cards and dice.'

From the above we gather that the sports on Christmas evenings, a hundred and fifty years ago, were not greatly dissimilar to those in vogue at the present day. The names of almost all the pastimes then mentioned must be familiar to every reader, who has probably also participated in them himself, at some period of his life. Let us only add charades, that favorite amusement of modern drawing-rooms (and of these only the name, not the sport itself, was unknown to our ancestors), together with a higher spirit of refinement and delicacy, and we shall discover little difference between the juvenile pastimes of a Christmas-party in the reign of Queen Victoria, and a similar assemblage in the reign of Queen Anne or the first Georges.

One favorite Christmas sport, very generally played on Christmas Eve, has been handed down to us from time immemorial under the name of 'Snapdragon.' To our English readers this amusement is perfectly familiar, but it is almost unknown in Scotland, and it seems therefore desirable here to give a description of the pastime.



A quantity of raisins are deposited in a large dish or bowl (the broader and shallower this is, the better), and brandy or some other spirit is poured over the fruit and ignited. The bystanders now endeavour, by turns, to grasp a raisin, by plunging their hands through the flames; and as this is somewhat of an arduous feat, requiring both courage and rapidity of action, a considerable amount of laughter and merriment is evoked at the expense of the unsuccessful competitors. As an appropriate accompaniment we introduce here; [...]

The Story of Snapdragon

Here he comes with flaming bowl,
 Don't he mean to take his toll,
 Snip! Snap! Dragon!

Take care you don't take too much,
 Be not greedy in your clutch,
 Snip! Snap! Dragon!

With his blue and lapping tongue
 Many of you will be stung,
 Snip! Snap! Dragon!

For he snaps at all that comes
 Snatching at his feast of plums,
 Snip! Snap! Dragon!

But Old Christmas makes him come,
 Though he looks so fee! fa! fum!
 Snip! Snap! Dragon!

Don't 'ee fear him, be but bold—
 Out he goes, his flames are cold,
 Snip! Snap! Dragon!

Whilst the sport of Snapdragon is going on, it is usual to extinguish all the lights in the room, so that the lurid glare from the flaming spirits may exercise to the full its weird-like effect. There seems little doubt that in this amusement we retain a trace of the fiery ordeal of the middle ages, and also of the Druidical fire-worship of a still remoter epoch. A curious reference to it occurs in the quaint old play of *Lingua*, quoted by Mr. Sandys in his work on Christmas:

Memory. Oh, I remember this dish well; it was first invented by Pluto to entertain Proserpine withal.

Phantastes. I think not so, Memory; for when Hercules had killed the flaming dragon of Hesperia, with the apples of that orchard he made this fiery meat; in memory whereof he named it Snap-dragon.

Snapdragon, to personify him, has a 'poor relation' or 'country cousin,' who bears the name of Flapdragon. This is a favorite amusement among the common people in the western counties of England, and consists in placing a lighted candle in a can of ale or cider, and drinking up the contents of the vessel. This act entails, of course, considerable risk of having the face singed, and herein lies the essence of the sport, which may be averred to be a somewhat more arduous proceeding in these days of moustaches and long whiskers than it was in the time of our close-shaved grandfathers.

PhillyGKC's Recommendations for modern adaptation:

- Warm up plate or dish to be used beforehand, in order to reduce chance of breakage.
- Ensure brandy does not totally cover raisins to make them easier to pick out.
- Use 80-100 proof (40%-50% ABV) brandy, cognac, or similar. Warm liquor gently before lighting, to make ignition easier.
- Monitor children and tipsy adults closely.