

## THE SPIRIT OF CHRISTMAS

I HAVE rather rashly undertaken to write of the Spirit of Christmas; and it presents a preliminary difficulty about which I must be candid. People are very curious nowadays in their way of talking about "the spirit" of a thing. There is, for example, a particular sort of prig who is always lecturing us about having the spirit of true Christianity, apart from all names and forms. As far as I can make out, he means the very opposite of what he says. He means that we are to go on using the names "Christian" and "Christianity," and so on, for something in which it is quite specially the spirit that is not Christian; something that is a sort of combination of the baseless optimism of an American atheist with the pacifism of a mild Hindoo. In the same way, we read a great deal about the Spirit of Christmas in modern journalism or commercialism; but it is really a reversal of the same kind. So far from preserving the essentials without the externals, it is rather preserving the externals where there cannot be the essentials. It means taking two mere material substances, like holly and mistletoe, and spreading them all over huge and homeless cosmopolitan hotels or round the Doric columns of impersonal clubs full of jaded and cynical old gentlemen; or in any other place where the actual spirit of Christmas is least likely to be. But there is also another way in which modern commercial complexity eats out the heart of the thing, while actually leaving the painted shell of it. And that is the much too elaborate system of dependence on buying and selling, and therefore on bustle and hustle; and the actual neglect of the new things that might be done by the old Christmas.

Normally, if anything were normal nowadays, it would seem a truism to say that Christmas has been a family festival. But it is now possible (as I have had the good or bad luck to discover) to earn a reputation for paradox simply by going on saying that truisms are true. In this case, of course, the reason, the only reasonable reason, was religious. It was concerned with a happy family because it was consecrated to the Holy Family. But it is perfectly true that many men saw the fact without specially feeling the reason. When we say the root was religious, we do not mean that Sam Weller was concentrated on theological values when he told the Fat Boy to "put a bit of Christmas," into some object, probably edible. We do not mean that the Fat Boy had gone into a trance of mystical contemplation like a monk seeing a vision. We do not even mean that Bob Cratchit defended punch by saying he was only looking on the wine when it was yellow; or that Tiny Tim quoted Timothy. We only mean that they, including their author, would have confessed humbly and heartily that there was someone historically quite anterior to Mr. Scrooge, who might be called the Founder of the Feast. But in any case, whatever the reason, all would have agreed about the result. Mr. Wardle's feast centred in Mr. Wardle's family; and none the less because the romantic shadows of Mr. Winkle and Mr. Snodgrass threatened to break it up for the formation of other families.

The Christmas season is domestic; and for that reason most people now prepare for it by struggling in tramcars, standing in queues, rushing away in trains, crowding despairingly into tea-shops, and wondering when or whether they will ever get home. I do not know whether some of them disappear for ever in the toy department or simply lie down and die in the tea-rooms; but by the look of them, it is quite likely. Just before the great festival of the home the whole population seems to have become homeless. It is the supreme triumph of industrial civilisation that, in the huge cities which seem to have far too many houses, there is a hopeless shortage of housing. For a long time past great numbers of our poor have become practically nomadic. We even confess the fact; for we talk of some of them as Street Arabs. But this domestic institution, in its present ironical phase, has gone beyond such normal abnormality. The feast of the family turns the rich as well as the poor into vagabonds. They are so scattered over the bewildering labyrinth of our traffic and our trade, that they sometimes cannot even reach the tea-shop; it would be indelicate, of course, to mention the tavern. They have a difficulty in crowding into their hotels, let alone separating to reach their houses. I mean quite the reverse of irreverence when I say that their only point of resemblance to the archetypal Christmas family is that there is no room for them at the inn.

Now Christmas is built upon a beautiful and intentional paradox; that the birth of the homeless should be celebrated in every home. But the other sort of paradox is not intentional and is certainly not beautiful. It is bad enough that we cannot altogether disentangle the tragedy of poverty. It is bad enough that the birth of the homeless, celebrated at hearth and altar, should sometimes synchronise with the death of the homeless in workhouses and slums. But we need not rejoice in this universal restlessness brought upon rich and poor alike; and it seems to me that in this matter we need a reform of the modern Christmas.

I will now emit another brilliant flash of paradox by remarking that Christmas occurs in the winter. That is, it is not only a feast dedicated to domesticity, but it is one deliberately placed under the conditions in which it is most uncomfortable to rush about and most natural to stop at home. But under the complicated conditions of modern conventions and conveniences, there arises this more practical and much more unpleasant sort of paradox. People have to rush about for a few weeks, if it is only to stay at home for a few hours. Now the old and healthy idea of such winter festivals was

this; that people being shut in and besieged by the weather were driven back on their own resources; or, in other words, had a chance of showing whether there was anything in them. It is not certain that the reputation of our most fashionable modern pleasure-seekers would survive the test. Some dreadful exposures would be made of some such brilliant society favourites, if they were cut off from the power of machinery and money. They are quite used to having everything done for them; and even when they go

to the very latest American dances, it seems to be mostly the Negro musicians who dance. But anyhow, on the average of healthy humanity I believe the cutting off of all these mechanical connections would have a thoroughly enlivening and awakening effect. At present they are always accused of merely amusing themselves; but they are doing nothing so noble or worthy of their human dignity. Most of them by this time cannot amuse themselves; they are too used to being amused.

Christmas might be creative. We are told, even by those who praise it most, that it is chiefly valuable for keeping up ancient customs or old-fashioned games. It is indeed valuable for both those admirable purposes. But in the sense of which I am now speaking it might once more be possible to turn the truth the other way round. It is not so much old things as new things that a real Christmas might create. It might, for instance, create new games, if people were really driven to invent their own games. Most of the very old games began with the use of ordinary tools or furniture. So the very terms of tennis were founded on the framework of the old inn courtyard. So, it is said, the stumps in cricket were originally only the three legs of the milking-stool. Now we might invent new things of this kind, if we remembered who is the mother of invention. How pleasing it would be to start a game in which we scored so much for hitting the umbrella-stand Or the dinner-wagon, or even the host and hostess; of course, with a missile of some soft material. Children who are lucky enough to be left alone in the nursery invent not only whole games, but whole dramas and life-stories of their own; they invent secret languages; they create imaginary families; they laboriously conduct family magazines. That is the sort of creative spirit that we want in the modern world; want both in the sense of desiring and in the sense of lacking it. If Christmas could become more domestic, instead of less, I believe there would be a vast increase in the real Christmas spirit; the spirit of the Child. But in indulging this dream we must once more invert the current convention into the form of a paradox. It is true in a sense that Christmas is the time at which the doors should be open. But I would have the doors shut at Christmas, or at least just before Christmas; and then the world shall see what we can do.

I cannot but remember, with something of a smile, that on an earlier and more controversial page of this book I have mentioned a lady who shuddered at the thought of the things perpetrated by my co-religionists behind closed doors. But my memory of it is mellowed by distance and the present subject, and I feel quite the reverse of controversial. I hope that lady, and all of her way of thinking, may also have the wisdom

to close their doors; and discover that only when all the doors are closed the best thing will be found inside. If they are Puritans, whose religion is only based on the Bible, let it for once indeed be a Family Bible. If they are Pagans, who can accept nothing but the winter feast, let it at least be a family feast. The discordance or discomfort complained of

by modern critics, in the family reunion, is not due to that mystical focal fire having been left burning, but to its having been left to go cold. It is because cold fragments of a

once living thing are clumsily lumped together; it is no argument against making the thing alive. Christmas toys are incongruously dangled before heavy and heathen uncles who wish they were playing golf. But that does not alter the fact that they might become

much brighter and more intelligent if they knew how to play with toys; and they are horrible bores about golf. Their dullness is only the last deadly product of the mechanical progress of organised and professional sports, in that rigid world of routine outside the home. When they were children, behind closed doors in the home, it is probable that nearly every one of them had day-dreams and unwritten dramas that belonged to them as much as Hamlet belonged to Shakespeare or Pickwick to Dickens. How much more thrilling it would be if Uncle Henry, instead of describing in detail all the strokes with which he ought to have got out of the bunker, were to say frankly that he had been on a voyage to the end of the world and had just caught the Great Sea-Serpent. How much more truly intellectual would be the conversation of Uncle William if, instead of telling us the point to which he had reduced his handicap, he could still say

with conviction that he was King of the Kangaroo Islands, or Chief of the Rango Dango Redskins. These things, projected from within, were in almost all human spirits; and it is

not normal that the inspiration of them should be so utterly crushed by the things without. Let it not be supposed for a moment that I also am among the tyrants of the earth, who would impose my own tastes, or force all the other children to play my own games. I have no disrespect for the game of golf; it is an admirable game. I have played it; or rather, I have played at it, which is generally regarded as the very opposite. By all means let the golfers golf and even the organisers organise, if their only conception of an

organ is something like a barrel-organ. Let them play golf day after day; let them play golf for three hundred and sixty-four days, and nights as well, with balls dipped in luminous paint, to be pursued in the dark. But let there be one night when things grow luminous from within: and one day when men seek for all that is buried in themselves, and discover, where she is indeed hidden, behind locked gates and shuttered windows, and doors thrice barred and bolted, the spirit of liberty.